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MIKE SHAYNE

MYSTERY MAGAZINE

JANUARY, 1965 Vol. 16, No. 2

NEW MIKE SHAYNE NOVELET

DEAD MAN'S WALK

by BRETT HALLIDAY

The evidence against the quiet little man seemed almost too overwhelming. In fact . . . Shayne had the odd feeling that he was as innocent of murder as an Irish elf.

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Complete

THE NEW MIKE SHAYNE NOVELET

DEAD MAN'S WALK

The Killer Had Claws of Steel . . . so Shayne Had to Time His Moves.

by BRETT HALLIDAY

WHEN MIKE SHAYNE strode into his office promptly at nine o'clock the first thing he noticed was the look in Lucy Hamilton's pretty brown eyes. It was Lucy's look of deep sympathy. Shayne groaned inwardly. It had been a long, hard week, and he knew what that look portended. His pert secretary had a friend in need.

Outwardly, Shayne grinned at Lucy, strode on into his private office, tossed his panama onto the hatrack, and sat down behind his desk. His feet up, he clasped his big paws behind his head, and waited for Lucy to follow him in. He did not have to wait long. Lucy entered the private office with her saddest smile mixed with a strong pinch of indignation.

"Okay, angel, who do you want me to help," Shayne said with a grin, "and don't worry if they can't pay me. I enjoy my work."

"It's nothing to jest about, Michael Shayne," Lucy said, a hurt look coming into her eyes.

"Sorry, angel," Shayne said, giving her arm a pat. "You want to tell me all about it?"

"Mrs. Babel's husband has been arrested, Michael. For murder! Why, Mr. Babel wouldn't hurt a flea! He's a quiet, unassuming little man who can do anything with figures. Anna says he once figured how much sand there is in the Sahara Desert. He's also very nice. He . . ."

"Whoa, angel! Who is Anna?" Shayne said.

"Mrs. Babel, Michael. Anna Babel. She and Mr. Babel—his name is Morris—live just below me."

© 1964, by Brett Halliday

"And Mr. Morris Babel has been arrested?" Shayne said.

"Isn't it ridiculous, Michael?" Lucy said. "Mr. Babel is an accountant and bookkeeper at a small investment company, Hedges and Hedges, in Miami Beach. They couldn't run the business without him."

"I'm sure they couldn't, angel," Shayne said drily. "Now just who did Mr. Babel murder? I mean, according to the police."

"Someone name McGraw," Lucy said. "Max McGraw, I think. Anna, that's Mrs. Babel, says Morris never even heard of a Max McGraw."

Shayne frowned. "Max McGraw? That wouldn't be Max McGraw the bookie, would it?"

"I don't know, Michael, but whoever he is Mr. Babel didn't kill him!" Lucy insisted.

"Painter doesn't usually arrest a man for nothing, Lucy," Shayne said. "I assume it was on the Beach?"

"Yes, Michael, in Mr. Babel's office," Lucy said, "and Chief Painter hasn't exactly arrested Mr. Babel, yet. He's holding him on suspicion and as a material witness."

"What does Painter have to go on?" Shayne said. The redhead was feeling more unhappy every minute. He had no desire to tangle with Miami Beach Chief of Detectives Peter Painter unless he felt convinced that an innocent man was in need of help. He became even more dispirited when Lucy answered his question.

"The watchman found Mr. Babel standing right over the body, Michael," she said. "Mr. Babel doesn't know how the man got into his office. He says he never laid eyes on him before."

Shayne groaned aloud this time. "Next you'll tell me Babel was alone, and the watchman found him with the murder weapon in his hand."

"He was alone, yes. I don't know about the weapon."

"All right, angel. My better judgment tells me not to get involved in this, but—" He shrugged. "Can I talk to Anna?"

"She went to visit Morris in jail."

Shayne nodded. "I suppose I'd better do the same, if I'm going to help."

His pert secretary's brown eyes beamed.

"Thank you, Michael," she said. "I already told Anna that you'd take the case."

Shayne got up slowly, clapped his panama on his red hair, and gave Lucy a crooked smile as he walked from his office. Outside, his face grew grim. He strode down the hall to the elevator, and rode to the lobby.

In the lobby of the Flagler Street building he bought a *Miami Daily News*. The story was buried on an inside page.

The story was simple. Max McGraw, a petty criminal well known to the police, had been killed in a Miami Beach office building. The police were holding the suspected murderer. Shayne nodded to himself. He knew the late Max McGraw very well. It did not look good for Morris Babel. Anyone who even knew McGraw was keeping bad company. It looked as if Morris Babel was not as nice or quiet a man as Lucy thought.

Shayne got into his car and drove toward the Causeway to Miami Beach. He began to brace himself for his dealings with Chief of Detectives Peter Painter. There were many who would applaud anyone who had killed Max McGraw, but Painter was not one of them. The dapper Chief was a hard man, and extenuating circumstances carried little weight with him when he was dealing with a murderer.

II

PETER PAINTER was less prepared for the meeting than Shayne. The dapper Chief of Detectives swore when the redhead walked in, and his anger did not abate when Shayne grinned and sat down. Painter did not sit, but rubbed his pencil mustache as he continued to glare at Shayne.

"I'm busy, Shayne!" Painter snapped.

"I'm here to ease your load."

"Ease yourself back across the Bay," Painter said.

"After I talk to Morris Babel," Shayne said. "His wife just hired me."

Painter sat down. The neat little man smoothed the lapel of his elegant suit. Painter was an expensive dresser. Few strangers took the Chief of Detectives for a cop, which pleased him. Now he smiled a thin smile from behind his desk as he swiveled in his chair.

"Since we've had Anna Babel over here for four hours, I find that hard to believe," Painter said. "But I wondered how long it would be before you got here."

"You wondered?" Shayne said. "You expected me then?"

"I'm not dumb, Shayne. I happened to notice that Lucy Hamilton lived just above the Babels. Besides, the Babel woman said she'd told Lucy. I know your secretary, Shayne. She's pretty much of a bleeding heart."

"All right, you're a detective after all," Shayne said. "Now do I get to see Morris Babel?"

"When his wife comes out. You know the rules, one visitor at a time, plus lawyer. You didn't get a law degree yet, did you?"

Shayne shrugged. "All right, why not fill me in while I'm waiting."

Painter grinned and pulled out a slim file. "I'm going to enjoy this," he said.

"Is it that certain?" Shayne said.

"Cut and dried, Shayne. I'll read the main facts. If I forget anything, just ask."

Still grinning, Painter opened the file, and began to read. "At about nine-thirty last night the night watchman of the building where Hedges and Hedges have their offices reached the sixth floor on his rounds. The sixth is the top floor.

"He went up in the elevator. He unlocked the door from the elevator into the office. It's one of those small office buildings where the elevator opens right into the individual suites. He stepped out of the elevator and found Morris Babel bending over the dead body of Max McGraw. He called us. We got there about nine thirty-eight.

"We recognized the corpse right away. Max McGraw, bookie, small-time con man, small-time gambler, and two-time loser. The Medical Examiner put the time of death between eight-thirty and nine-thirty, probably closer to nine o'clock flat. Cause of death—a stab wound from a very thin instrument like an ice-pick or a desk spindle. There was a desk spindle on a desk not two feet from the body. The lab has it now.

"There are three ways in or out of that office. The stairs door, which is locked from inside. A door up and out to the roof, also locked. The elevator. Now the elevator door was locked when the watchman came up. It can be locked inside without a key, but it takes a key to lock it from outside. It's not a spring lock. The same is true of the door to the roof.

"Only the watchman has a key to the roof door. Other people beside Babel have keys to the stairs and elevator doors, but no one came past the watchman. He was watching the downstairs door until about nine twenty-five. Then he went up on the elevator to start his rounds at the top floor. He works from the top down."

Painter finished reading and sat back in his chair. The dapper Chief of Detectives seemed to be waiting. Shayne felt that he was about to walk into a trap.

"Two possibilities besides Babel," Shayne said. "The watchman himself, and someone who timed it just right to kill McGraw and get out down the stairs while the watchman was coming up on the elevator."

"Very good," Painter said. "You've hit the nail. Those are the only other possibilities."

Painter grinned then and leaned forward. "Only, Shayne, the watchman has an alibi. It seems he is a close friend of one of my men patrolling that area. Officer Tim Packer. I'm afraid Officer Packer stopped to chat and, possibly, have a nip from a bottle with the watchman.

"Packer was there from about

eight-fifteen until past nine forty-five. In fact he was still there in the downstairs lobby when I arrived. And he swears no one went in or out of that building from eight-thirty until nine forty-five!"

"Packer was there over an hour?" Shayne said.

"He was off duty, he went off at eight," Painter said. "He's an old friend of that watchman, and he swears the watchman was with him from eight fifteen to nine twenty-five. Which leaves Morris Babel."

"What's the motive?"

"I don't know yet," Painter said, "but I'll find it. My men are at his apartment now."

"What does Babel say?"

This time Painter laughed out loud.

"I think I'll let him tell you himself," Painter said. "I don't think I could repeat it with a straight face."

The woman's voice spoke from the doorway into Painter's office.

"I thought a man was innocent until proven guilty, Chief Painter," the woman said.

She stood in the doorway, tall and still good-looking despite her forty-odd years. Her face was pale and haggard. She wore a neat, but not expensive, black dress. Shayne did not need the handbag monogrammed *AB* to tell him that this was Anna Babel.

"We'll prove it, Mrs. Babel," Painter said.

"How?" the woman said. "Morris never hurt anyone, no matter how little you believe his story. It has to be the truth."

"You heard it by now," Painter snapped. "How could it be the truth?"

"I— I know it's the truth," the woman faltered, her composure leaving her for the first time. But she gathered herself together and turned toward Shayne. "You're Mike Shayne? Lucy said you'd help. I'm grateful, Mr. Shayne."

"Maybe you better wait to thank me," Shayne said.

"Why, Mr. Shayne?" Anna Babel said.

"If he's guilty, I'll help convict him, Mrs. Babel," Shayne said. "Lucy knows that."

"And so do I," Anna Babel said. "Perhaps you better talk to him."

"Maybe I'd better," Shayne said.

"Shayne, I'd give up more than one good night's sleep just to see your face when you hear this story," Painter said. He had turned back to the papers on his desk when Shayne entered the cell section.

III

MIKE SHAYNE was not sure what his face looked like as he listened to Morris Babel's story, but inwardly he felt more than a little sick. The story was impossible.

"Let's try it once more," Shayne said.

The jail cell was clean and well lighted, but nothing could dispel the aura of prison. Down the corridor two drunks were singing low and solemn and flat. Somewhere a man was whistling. Another prisoner snored in the distance.

"All right, Mr. Shayne," Babel said.

Morris Babel was a small man of about forty-six, with graying hair and intense dark eyes that he kept almost constantly trained on Shayne.

"I was working late, as I often do," Babel said. "I happen to enjoy my work. Well, it must have been somewhere around nine-fifteen that I heard the noise. I was working in my own office. It is a small inner office that opens onto the main office where the secretaries and counsellors work. I heard this noise, and—"

"What kind of noise?" Shayne interrupted.

"How can I tell you?" Babel said. "Just a noise, something striking a desk prehaps, I'm not sure. I paid little attention. I listened for a moment, but it didn't come again, so I went back to my work. The noise seemed far away anyway. The second time I heard it, it was much nearer.

"Again it was just a noise, but closer. I listened, you know the way you do when you hear just a single sound. I thought I heard more sounds, very light this time, so I called out to ask who was there. I thought Mr. or Mrs. Hedges might have come in. Well, there was no answer, and no more sounds. So I got up and walked out to see. The outer office was dark, so I switched on the light.

"This man was lying there. I could see he was dead almost at once, but I bent down to listen to his heart anyway. He was dead. I looked for some mark on him, but I couldn't see anything. There wasn't any blood. They tell me he was stabbed, but why wasn't there any blood?"

"Wounds like that don't bleed much. Too small; they seal up on themselves," Shayne explained. "Go on."

"That's all. I was standing there over the body when the watchman opened the elevator door and found me. He called the police, they arrested me. That's all I

know except that I never saw that man before."

"You're sure?" Shayne said.

"Absolutely. I have an excellent memory for faces," Babel said.

"How did he get into your office?"

"I'm sure I have no idea," Babel said.

On the cell bunk where he was sitting, Shayne began to tug slowly on his earlobe. His grey eyes expressed nothing that Babel could have seen, but inside he was feeling almost angry at the man. If Babel was lying it was about the weakest lie Shayne had ever heard.

In fact the only good part of the whole ridiculous story was that it would have been useless to Babel if it had been a lie. It almost had to be the truth—unless Babel, surprised by the watchman, had decided to tell such a bad story that it would make him seem truthful, or because it was the only explanation he could think of when he'd been caught red-handed.

"So what you're saying is that *two* men, at least, got into the outer office. McGraw was killed, and you didn't see anyone or anything?" Shayne said.

"Apparently, Mr. Shayne," Babel said, "although I can't think how they did get in. I mean, I would definitely have heard the elevator door open. I would also have known if anyone had entered by the back door. You see, they both make a definite sound because they stick."

Now Shayne stared at the small man. Babel seemed entirely unaware of what he had just said. The man seemed to be really trying to imagine how anyone could have gotten into the office without his hearing them.

Shayne almost groaned aloud this time. "You didn't happen to mention that to the police, did you?"

"Of course I did," Babel said innocently. "Chief Painter seemed very interested in knowing how that man McGraw could have gotten into the office. I told him it mystified me, and it does. I really wonder how he *did* get in? Or *they,* since there had to be two men."

"Couldn't they have been already in the office when you arrived?" Shayne said.

Babel thought. "Well, possibly, I didn't check the other private offices. But all the doors were locked when I arrived. How could anyone have gotten in without a key? Besides, if they were in the office, how did the second man get out? I understand the watchman or a policeman would have seen anyone leave."

Shayne stood up. The detective was studying the mild little man. Babel appeared almost unaware of his great danger. He was obviously very interested in the prob-

lem as a puzzle, as if he himself were completely detached from any involvement. It was either pure innocence, or a very fine job of acting. Shayne was not at all sure which it was.

"All right, Morris," Shayne said. "Just two more questions. First, who else has keys to the office? Second, just when did you return to the office last night?"

"Mr. and Mrs. Hedges are the only other ones with keys to the stairs door," Babel said. "Almost all our employees have keys to the front door out of the elevator. And I arrived at exactly seven-thirty."

"The watchman can verify that?" Shayne asked.

"No, he was somewhere else at the time," Babel said. "No one saw me come in."

"That's just fine," Shayne said. "Okay, Morris, you sit tight, and I'll see what I can do."

As he left the cell, and watched the guard lock Morris Babel in, Shayne was beginning to wonder just how much he *could* do.

IV

PETER PAINTER was alone in his office when Mike Shayne returned. Anna Babel was not there. Painter scowled the moment he saw Shayne's face.

"Don't tell me you believe that tripe, Shayne?" Painter snapped.

"It's so bad I have to," Shayne said.

"It's so bad because the watchman caught him cold, and no one else could have done it!" Painter said. "God, he couldn't even come up with any explanation of how McGraw got into the office. Not one explanation!"

"You figure McGraw came with him? Or he let McGraw in before eight-thirty?" Shayne said.

"Of course he did. McGraw had an appointment with him," Painter said.

"You can prove that?"

Painter reached into his desk and extracted a small sheet of writing paper from a small pile of personal belongings. The Miami Beach Chief of Detectives tossed the paper to Shayne. Shayne read it. In a handwritten scrawl it read, *Eight-Forty-Five, Thursday, don't be seen or deal off.*

"We found it in McGraw's pocket," Painter said.

"It's not signed," Shayne said. "Is it Babel's writing?"

"We're checking. If it is his writing, it cooks him. If it isn't it doesn't matter. He could have had anyone write it."

Shayne studied the note. It was on ordinary letter paper, torn from a larger sheet. There were no marks on it, and it was heavily crumpled as if shoved into a pocket after being read. Shayne frowned. He smelled the paper. There was a faint but definite odor of perfume. An exotic perfume. Not the type he would expect Anna Babel to use.

Shayne looked at Painter. "Was McGraw married?" he asked.

"Yes," Painter admitted. "We're checking the perfume."

"What else did McGraw have on him?"

Painter reached again into his desk and brought out the entire pile of personnel effects. Shayne leaned forward to study them. There was $200 in cash, a wallet with a driver's license and various business cards, a ring of keys, four stubs of tickets on a horse race, a deck of cards, and a small, heavy square of some kind of transparent plastic with a miniature horse encapsulated inside the plastic. Shayne held up the plastic square.

Painter shrugged. "You know gamblers. A horse, a lucky charm."

"It's a little big and heavy for a lucky piece," Shayne said.

"Who knows with horse players," Painter said.

Shayne held the plastic object. The horse inside was black and well detailed. And somewhere in Shayne's mind it rang a faint bell. He had seen that kind of black horse before. It was a running horse, its long tail flying out behind, its neck extended.

"I've seen that kind of horse before," Shayne said. "I've seen someone else carrying a small horse just like it on a watch chain, or tie clip, or—"

"They're probably a dime a dozen, Shayne," Painter said.

Shayne nodded. He reached and picked up the wallet that had been in the pocket of the dead man. It seemed *light*. There was a slackness about it as if it had once been much more tightly packed. In a rear section of the wallet there were four or five IOU's, all bearing signatures which meant nothing to Shayne.

"Yeh," Painter said. "I figure there were a lot more IOU's in that wallet."

"You think that was Babel's motive?"

"I'm working on it."

"You didn't find any on Babel when you arrested him."

"There are toilets in that office, Shayne," Painter said drily.

Again Shayne nodded. "Can I see the body?" he asked.

"Anything for you, Shayne," Painter said.

The dapper little Chief was enjoying himself. He led the way down the hall toward the morgue with a spring to his step. Painter did not exactly like Shayne, and it pleased the elegant Miami Beach detective to have him in a corner. Painter had no doubts about the guilt of Morris Babel. Shayne was finding it hard to think optimistically himself but it was an effort that had to be made.

On the morgue slab drawn out of the refrigerator by the attendant, Max McGraw seemed peaceful. At first Shayne could not see a mark on the small body. Then he noticed the bullet hole—a tiny puncture almost in the center of the slain man's rib cage. There was no blood. McGraw had bled internally, if at all.

"Was he killed instantly?" Shayne asked.

"As a matter of fact, no," Paintter said. "The ME says maybe five, maybe ten minutes. I can get you the details."

"I'll take your word, Painter," Shayne said.

Shayne nodded to the attendant who pushed Max McGraw back into the refrigerator. Shayne turned on his heel and strode out. Morgues depressed him. Painter trotted along behind. This time Anna Babel was in Painter's office as they came in. She was not alone. Detective Jim Malloy of Painter's Squad was with her. Malloy handed a bundle of small newspaper-type magazines to Painter.

"We found them in his apartment," Malloy said. "That's only a sample. There must have been fifty more."

Painter looked slowly at one after the other of the small publications. The dapper Chief of Detectives began to grin widely. He handed the publications to Shayne. They were all racing forms. They were well-thumbed, marked, the odds figured over in pencil, and amounts of money marked beside various horses' names in almost all of the races.

"Now we book Babel," Painter said. "There's your motive, Shayne. A horse-player. His bosses better check their cash."

Anna Babel suddenly burst out, "It was a *hobby!* He liked figures, he never really bet! You have to believe me, all of you. Morris never gambled! He liked to play imaginary betting. He played the stockmarket, too. He worked out roulette systems, and blackjack odds! It was all a hobby, Mr. Shayne, I swear to you! Please . . . please!"

Shayne placed his big hand on the woman's shoulder. Sobs wracked her body. She slumped into a chair, her face held in her hands.

Shayne looked at Painter. "You still don't have any connection be-

tween McGraw and Babel," he said.

"A bookie is murdered," Painter said. "The only man who could have killed him turns out to be a horseplayer. I'll get the connection, Shayne, and proof of Babel's betting. But I'm not sure I even need it."

"Do you need Mrs. Babel any more?" Shayne said.

"The D.A. wants a few words, if that's okay with you."

Shayne nodded. He patted the shoulder of Anna Babel to reassure her. As he turned to go he stopped.

"You know," Shayne said to Painter, "I've got a hunch you won't find any connection or any betting."

"You want to bet on it?" Painter said. The little Chief seemed vastly amused by his own joke. To Shayne it seemed totally lacking in luster.

V

THREE HOURS later Mike Shayne sat in the cool of the *Eagle Lounge* just off Flagler Street, still hearing Painter's laughter. Three hours of trying to trace the movements of Max McGraw had gotten Shayne exactly nowhere. Until seven o'clock last night McGraw had been seen in all his usual haunts, and had not acted strange in any way. After that no one had seen him again.

Now Shayne wrapped his big hand around his second double Martel and scowled at his newspaper friend, Tim Rourke. The lean reporter seemed equally glum.

"That's it, Mike," Rourke said. "Nothing special on Max McGraw since his last sentence ran out. Oh, we know he was making book, but nothing in the way of special troubles in our files at the *News*."

"And nothing on Morris Babel or his wife?" Shayne said.

"Nothing. Will Gentry says no record of any kind on either of them," Rourke said.

"I was sure of that," the redhead said, nodding."

Rourke looked down at his glass. "Mike, maybe Painter's right this time. I mean, who could have killed McGraw except Babel?"

"I don't know, Tim, but Lucy's feelings carry considerable weight with me. She seems so completely sure that Painter is barking up the wrong tree," Shayne said. "And there's a few other small points. Babel acts like a real innocent type. But no one would have been dumb enough to kill a man, take the IOU's, and leave that note if he knew it was in McGraw's pocket. Not if he had written it.

"Then there's the perfume. It isn't Anna Babel's perfume, and I doubt if Babel has a secret girl friend. Finally, there's that horse inside the plastic square. It still

rings a bell in my mind somewhere."

"The perfume could belong to McGraw's wife," Rourke said, "and the horse-in-plastic could have been McGraw's. It would be logical, Mike."

"Maybe I better find out."

"Mrs. McGraw?" Rourke said.

Shayne nodded. "Next stop."

"What can I do?" Rourke said.

"See what you have on Babel's bosses, Mr. and Mrs. Hedges. They have keys to that office."

"But they're not invisible, Mike. Even if they got in, how did they get out? How did *anyone* get out?"

"I'll figure out *how* when I find out *who*. They usually go together," Shayne said.

"Yeh, but in the other order, Mike. A punk like McGraw had a hundred enemies who would have killed him for a quarter and given fifteen cents change," Rourke said. "But only Babel could have killed him."

"No, Tim," Shayne said. "It's not as simple as it looks. For instance, if McGraw didn't die immediately why didn't he call for help? Babel's light was on in his office, and McGraw must have seen it. Why didn't he cry out when he was stabbed?"

"You're assuming Babel's telling a true story, Mike. None of that matters. According to the police Babel was *alone* with McGraw. Babel killed McGraw—not some mysterious stranger in the outer office who got in and out by magic. So Babel's story doesn't carry any weight with the police."

"It does to me," Shayne said grimly.

"Look, Mike," Rourke said. "It boils down to this: If Babel killed McGraw there are no problems and no questions. It all fits. But if Babel *didn't* kill McGraw, you've got a hundred problems and questions that just can't be answered. If Babel didn't kill McGraw, it looks like a frame, but who would want to frame Babel, and how did the body get into Babel's office?"

"When I know that, I'll know who killed McGraw," Shayne said. "In the meantime, check on Mr. and Mrs. Hedges, find out if they had any connection to McGraw."

"Will do, Mike," Rourke said.

The two men paid their bill and left the *Eagle Lounge*. Outside they separated, Rourke to go to his office, and Shayne to visit the widow of Max McGraw.

McGraw turned out to have lived in a cheap rooming house in one of the poorer sections of Miami. The widow of the dead gambler was at home, and she was not alone. A short, stocky man sat with her. The man was wearing stained slacks that hung loose from his paunch, and a dirty undershirt that was dark with spreading sweat. The woman lay on the bed smoking with fingers stained almost black by cigarette smoke.

"Another cop?" Mrs. McGraw said. "Ain't you guys got nothin' better to do?"

The man snorted. "He ain't no cop. He's Mike Shayne, a private snooper. We ain't got to talk to you, peeper."

The woman shrugged on the bed. "Why not, Sam? Max's dead, so who cares? What do you want to know, shamus?"

"Was Max in any trouble?" Shayne said.

"Max was always in trouble," the widow said.

"I mean special," Shayne said. "Trouble with someone who might have killed him."

"The police got the guy what killed him, Shayne," the man named Sam said.

"Who else might have wanted to kill Max?" Shayne said.

The widow laughed. "You got a couple of hours to waste maybe I could give you a list. Max always had a deal and someone always got hurt."

"Shut up, Blanche!" the man said.

"Just who are you?" Shayne asked.

"Him?" Blanche McGraw said. "That's my big brother Sam. Yeh, Sam Kowalski, the big deal. Almost as big a deal as Max."

"I said shut up!" Sam Kowalski said. "The less you say in front of him the better off you'll be."

The woman laughed again. "He's mad 'cause Max had a big deal on and wouldn't cut him in. Not even a good tip, huh Sam?"

The paunchy man glared at his sister. Shayne raised a shaggy red eyebrow. He watched the slatternly widow where she still lay on the bed smoking her third cigarette since Shayne had come into the shabby room.

"A big deal?" Shayne said.

The woman nodded. "First deal Max ever had that paid off, and now he gets croaked. It figures, you know? Nickels and dimes all my life, and now he's got real money and he gets himself knocked off. My luck."

"What kind of deal?" Shayne asked slowly.

"Who knows? Max don't tell me nothin'. All I know is he had dough. The last six months he's got plenty of cash. He used to

laugh when he brought the cash home."

"You don't know where he got it?" Shayne said.

"Where? Sure I know where, at the tracks. All the tracks but mostly the dogs. Dogs and out-of-state trotters. I know where, only I don't know how. Max was a pretty good bookie, but a lousy gambler. All of a sudden he was winning. That's what made Sam so mad, Max wouldn't tip him. Max just laughed and said he had a real good system, and he was keeping it to himself."

"A system?" Shayne said, and he did not feel good. Morris Babel made a hobby of playing games with 'systems'. It had happened before, the innocent game that became only too real in the hands of a professional like McGraw. Could McGraw have bumped into Babel and made a deal?

"Yeh," Blanche McGraw said. "A foolproof system, Max said, and it sure looked it the way he brought the loot home. He said Cheval never knew what—"

"I told you to shut up!" Sam Kowalski yelled at his sister.

For an instant the woman seemed suddenly scared herself at what she had said. She lighted another cigarette, and brushed her hand across her sweating face.

"Cheval?" Shayne said. "Larry Cheval?"

"Get the hell out of here, peeper!" Sam Kowalski said.

"Larry Cheval can be real mean," Shayne said.

"You better blow like Sam says. I'm drunk," Blanche McGraw said.

But Shayne was not listening. Larry Cheval! He knew Cheval. A big-time gambler. A man the police had been trying to get for a long time. Cheval had the reputation of a man who 'fixed' races, crap games, poker games, anything and everything illegal and fixed. A careful man who did hard business. So hard, and so careful, no one had ever gotten anything on him that would stand up in court. People who could hurt Larry Cheval did not live long. But all that was not what was really flashing like a beacon in Shayne's mind.

"Don't go too far from Miami," Shayne said to the widow and Kowalski. "If the police don't want you, maybe I will."

Shayne left them glaring at each other. The woman had lighted still another cigarette, her shaky hand pouring a new drink. Sam Kowalski, poured a drink, too. They were two worried people. Shayne could understand that, if Larry Cheval was involved.

In his car Shayne lighted a cigarette himself. The beacon was still flashing in his brain. He had remembered where he had seen the running horse with the long neck and flying tail. Years ago someone had told Larry Cheval that his

name meant "horse" in French. Cheval was not a man to overlook an omen like that. Ever since then the running horse had been Cheval's trademark. The big-time gambler had the horse on his ties, his tie-clips, his cuff-links, his handkerchiefs, everywhere.

And Max McGraw had had a big deal. Shayne began to grin as he started the motor. He wanted to have a talk with Larry Cheval.

VI

MIKE SHAYNE got Cheval's home address from Tim Rourke. Tim had found nothing yet on the Hedges' beyond the fact that they ran a good business. Rourke was continuing his check. Shayne hung up the telephone in the booth from where he had called his reporter friend, and drove on to Larry Cheval's palatial home.

Cheval's house was big and expensive. It was set back from the road in an exclusive section of Miami. There was a high fence around the grounds, and the gate was guarded by a surly and very muscular man. The guard was not friendly, but he reluctantly agreed to call the house to inform Cheval that Mike Shayne wanted to talk to him.

"Okay, he says go on up," the guard said.

The gates opened and Shayne drove up a long, curving drive to the front door of the house. A liveried flunkie met him. The man seemed every inch the proper servant, but there was a careless and suspicious bulge under his arm. The servant turned without a word and led Shayne through the elegant house and out to the pool.

Larry Cheval was a heavily tanned man of average height, and build, with the smooth skin of a man who took good care of himself. He sat at his ease beside the pool. A magnificent blonde in the scantiest of abbreviated bathing suits lay on a chaise lounge beside Cheval, her eyes hidden by large and expensive dark glasses.

Shayne guessed that Cheval was in his forties, the woman in her mid-thirties. She wore a wedding ring and solitaire.

"What can I do for you, Shayne?" Cheval said pleasantly. "But how about a drink first?"

"No thanks, Cheval," Shayne said.

Shayne had already noted the monogrammed running horse on Cheval's bathing suit. Cheval also wore a large ring with the same horse on it.

"All business, eh?" Cheval grinned. "Okay, Shayne, what do you figure I've done now?"

"What do you know about Max McGraw?" Shayne said bluntly.

"He's dead," Cheval said equally bluntly.

"Before he got dead," Shayne said.

Cheval smiled. "What's there to

know? A small-time punk too dumb to stay out of jail, and too dumb to make it all pay off."

"I heard he was doing better lately," Shayne said.

Cheval's eyes clouded. "Rumors like that get around. So what?"

"I heard he had a deal, and was making real good bets."

"So he got lucky," Larry Cheval said.

"That could be it. But maybe he got tips on fixed deals," Shayne said.

"What is that supposed to mean to me?" Cheval said.

"Maybe they were your fixes, Cheval?"

Cheval did not even blink. The gambler stared at Shayne. The blonde had removed her dark glasses and was watching Shayne now.

Cheval waved his hand. "You talk fix, Shayne, you talk to my lawyers," he said. "You talk fix, you better have facts. You got facts?"

"No," Shayne said, "and I don't care about your fixes, except maybe the one's McGraw was in on."

"You're boring me, peeper," Cheval said.

The blonde had sat up. Now she leaned toward Shayne, the motion filling her bathing suit so well Shayne almost forgot to listen he was so busy looking.

"I heard that the man who killed McGraw was some kind of accountant. Maybe McGraw had a system," the blonde said.

"Stay out of this, Lucille," Cheval said.

"It was only a thought, honey," the blonde said.

Cheval looked at Shayne. "My wife doesn't mix in my business, Shayne. You got more on your mind?"

Lucille Cheval lay back again. But the blonde beauty did not put her dark glasses back on. Shayne had the impression that Mrs. Cheval was very much interested in Cheval's business. But it was what the woman had said that interested Shayne now. He looked at the blonde.

"How do you know Painter's suspect is an accounatnt, Mrs. Cheval?" Shayne said.

"What?" the blonde said, "Oh, Larry told me. Didn't you, dear?"

"I did," Cheval said. "I've got connections, Shayne, don't get ideas. I was curious, you know? So I asked around down at Headquarters."

"You know his name?"

"Yeh, Morris Babel, the poor crumb," Cheval said.

"Maybe you didn't have to ask the police."

"I never heard of the guy before. That was sure a surprise. Max had enough friends to kill him. He didn't need a stranger."

"What about you, Mrs. Cheval? Do you know Morris?"

"I told you to leave Lucille out

of this!" Cheval said sharply. "She doesn't mix in with gamblers! Look, I'll level with you. I heard that McGraw was hitting the money good. He even took me for some. McGraw was too dumb to bet that smart himself, so it figures he had a deal with someone. Maybe he had a system with this Babel."

Lucille Cheval spoke up again. "Perhaps McGraw was putting the screws on Babel. It figures. Babel was maybe into him—"

"I told you to stay out of it!" Cheval snapped. "You better beat it now, Shayne."

"I suppose you have an alibi for eight-thirty to nine-thirty last night, Cheval?" Shayne said.

Cheval's eyes were slits. "Do I need one?"

"Maybe you will," Shayne said.

"Okay, peeper," Cheval said. "You say eight-thirty to nine-thirty? Well, I got half an alibi. I was in my office working like always until half past eight. I left and drove around until nine o'clock on the nose. I was working in my car. It's real private, so no one saw me except my driver. At nine o'clock, maybe a few minutes after, I was in the bar at *The Blue Parrot.*"

"Ray Incavo's place?" Shayne said.

"Yeh. Lucille picked me up at the bar at five after nine, and we had dinner until around ten-fifteen. Then I had a little fling at the blackjack table."

"You can prove that?"

"At *The Blue Parrot?* Incavo saw me. Every bartender and waiter in the joint knows me. I always check the time with the bartenders."

Shayne tugged his ear. The ME said McGraw had been killed between 8:30 and 9:30, closer to nine o'clock. Cheval could have killed McGraw, but he could not have been in Babel's office with McGraw at 9:25.

"I'll do you a favor, Shayne," Cheval said. "Check up close on that cow Blanche McGraw. Word was out that McGraw was playing around with some woman. Blanche's brother, Sam Kowalski, had been asking about McGraw around town. Blanche is a cow, but maybe even a cow has feelings."

"What about Kowalski?" Shayne said.

"That punk? He'd murder himself if the price was right."

"Thanks," Shayne said as he stood up.

Behind him, as he left, Shayne heard Lawrence Cheval begin to argue with his wife. But Shayne was thinking about Max McGraw and another woman. Anna Babel was an attractive woman. At his car, Shayne got in and drove out of Cheval's grounds. On the highway he drove as fast as he could to the nearest telephone booth.

VII

TIMOTHY ROURKE did not let Shayne ask his first question. The voice of the lean reporter on the other end of the telephone was grim.

"Painter's got the D.A. getting up the indictment, Mike," Rourke's voice said. "He's got Babel cold. His men found a file on Babel in Max McGraw's office. Bets, losses, the whole thing. The file says Babel was into Max for a cool seven grand."

"When did they find it?" Shayne said. The redhead felt very cold though the hot sun poured through the window of the bar where the telephone booth was located.

"About an hour ago. Painter had them go over the place with a microscope. They found the file under a pile of racing forms. McGraw wasn't neat."

Shayne was tugging hard on his earlobe. The detective was thinking fast.

"Was there anything in the file signed by Babel? IOU's, anything like that?"

"No, Mike, but Painter figures that was what Babel killed McGraw for," Rourke said.

"All right, Tim. Anything on the Hedges?"

"No, Mike."

"Okay, but I better talk to them," Shayne said.

He hung up and returned to his car. The address of Mr. and Mrs. Benjamin Hedges was in Miami Beach. Shayne drove across the Causeway in the afternoon sun. He found the Hedges' house in a quiet area of the Beach. It was a good but modest house set in well-tended grounds. The couple were at home.

Benjamin Hedges was a tall man in his early sixties. His wife was a rather slatternly-looking but not unattractive blonde, perhaps fifteen years younger. The house was tasteful but not gaudy. Benjamin Hedges did not mind answering questions.

"No, Mr. Shayne," Hedges said. "I have no reason to suspect Morris of being involved with that man."

"We checked the books this morning, of course," Mrs. Hedges explained. "But everything is in order."

"No money missing?" Shayne said.

"Not a penny," Hedges said.

"Do you have any idea how

someone could have gotten in, and out of that office without having a key?"

"No one could have, Mr. Shayne," Mrs. Hedges said. "I'm certain of that."

"Was Babel having any trouble with his wife?" Shayne asked.

"With Anna? Of course not, she's devoted to him," Mrs. Hedges protested.

"Devoted wives have strayed before," Shayne said drily.

"Not Anna, and not with a man like that McGraw," Hedges said. "I take it that was what you had in mind."

Shayne did not think Anna Babel would have strayed with a man like McGraw either. He hesitated before asking his next question.

Mr. Hedges noticed, and smiled sadly. "You can ask it, Mr. Shayne," he said. "The police did. They wanted to know if *we* knew McGraw. Well—we didn't. We don't know men like that."

"And where were you between eight-thirty and nine-thirty last night?" Shayne asked.

"We were here, Mr. Shayne," Benjamin Hedges said. "I'm afraid we were alone."

"No alibi?"

"No alibi, and the office is not far away," Hedges said. "I realize that. But we didn't kill McGraw."

Shayne nodded. "Could anyone have gotten your keys without you knowing it?"

"No, Mr. Shayne. Impossible."

"Who else has keys to all the doors in the office?"

"Only Morris, I'm afraid," Hedges said. "And, of course, the superintendent who gives them to the watchman at night."

"Could anyone have made copies of your keys?"

"Well," Hedges said, and hesitated. The older man looked at his wife. "To get mine would have been difficult. I carry them on a watch chain. But I suppose my wife's *could* have been taken from her handbag for a short time. She does leave it on her desk. If she left her office for a conference, I suppose it would have been possible."

Mrs. Hedges shook her head slowly. "Possible, but not very likely, Benjamin. I mean, I do leave my bag unwatched at times, but our business is very in-and-out of the office. There would be no way for anyone to tell just when I would want to use my keys. It would be risky, Mr. Shayne."

The detective nodded. "Okay, I think that's all for now."

He stood up to leave. Mrs. Hedges looked up at Shayne.

"Morris didn't kill anyone, Mr. Shayne," the woman said. "You will help him?"

"I'm trying to, Mrs. Hedges," Shayne said simply.

"And Mr. Shayne," Benjamin Hedges said. "Whatever it costs, we'll be glad to pay it for Morris Babel."

"We'll talk about that when Babel's cleared," Shayne said.

Outside in the sun he walked slowly back to his car. He drove once more across the Causeway into Miami. It had been a long day, with very little to show for it. A *big deal* and a possible mysterious woman were all Mike Shayne had to go on. Perhaps it would be enough.

VIII

THE ROOMING HOUSE where the late Max McGraw had lived was deserted as Shayne drove up. He parked and walked toward the front door. There was loud, raucous laughter from somewhere inside, and as he neared the dim hall to McGraw's door, he realized that it was coming from McGraw's rooms.

Sam Kowalski opened the door when Shayne knocked. A very drunk Sam Kowalski.

"Hey now, look who's back! Come on in, Shamus, join the party. We're celebratin' old Max's memory! Come on!"

Shayne followed the paunchy brother-in-law into the dingy room. Empty bottles littered the table and floor. Blanche McGraw did not seem to have moved since Shayne had last been in the room. The slatternly woman still lay on the bed. Her entire appearance had changed, however. There was a look of triumph and exaltation in her eyes now, and she had quite obviously had more than a few drinks.

"Hey, peeper, pull up a chair!" Blanche cried. "You're just in time to help us celebrate."

On the table Shayne saw a large pile of money. There were tens and twenties and a few fifties. There was a great deal of money on the bottle-littered table. Shayne raised a shaggy eyebrow. He remembered the half-empty wallet of Max McGraw. Perhaps it had not been IOU's in the dead man's wallet. Perhaps McGraw had been carrying a lot of money.

"That's a lot of money," Shayne said. "Someone die?"

Blanche McGraw giggled. "Yeh, peeper, someone died and left us five whole grand."

Kowalski swayed toward the half-full bottle.

"Come on, shamus, have a drink. Get human."

"Where'd you get it, Blanche?" Shayne said.

"You shouldn't have any trouble figuring that out, peeper. Max left it to me," the woman said, and giggled again.

"It's plenty hard to figure out," Shayne said. "You didn't know about it earlier, and the police don't know about it."

"Dumb—you're all dumb," Blanche McGraw said. "After you left I got to thinking. Max had this big deal, and Max don't believe in banks, and the cops don't say

nothing about Max having any money on him, see? The cops searched the place pretty good, only they don't find nothing. So I figured what Max would do if he wanted to hide loot.

"Max he liked the money close to him, you know? So we started looking under the floor, in the chairs, and what do you know? We found it! Five beautiful grand. You know where? Right here!"

The woman patted the bed she was lying on. Shayne looked at the bed. It was a brass bedstead of the old-fashioned kind with big, round pillars at the head and foot.

Blanche McGraw giggled again. "Yeh, the jerk had it inside the posts at the foot of the bed! Five whole grand! What you think of that?"

"Can you prove it?" Shayne said bluntly.

The woman blinked. "Prove? Why should we have to prove it, peeper?"

"Because McGraw could have had it on him," Shayne said. "Maybe he had it right in his wallet. Cheval says that if he did both you or Kowalski are number one suspects."

Kowalski swayed toward Shayne. The paunchy man swung wildly. Shayne moved his head a fraction of an inch. The wild blow slid harmlessly past. Shayne reached out and pushed the man lightly. Kowalski reeled across the room and crashed against the wall.

The drunken man slid to the floor.

Shayne looked at Blanche McGraw. "Cheval says you were jealous, Blanche. I figure maybe greedy, too."

"Cheval says!" Blanche shrieked. "Cheval says I killed Max?"

"He says Max was playing footsie with some other woman," Shayne said.

"Cheval says Max was—" The woman blinked, then began to laugh maniacally. "A woman! Sure Max was playing with a woman, what did I care? He brings home the dough he can play with ten women! A woman Cheval says? I'll show you a woman!"

The drunken widow began to paw through her purse. She threw the contents all over the dirty bed. At last she held what she wanted. It was a small photograph. Blanche McGraw threw the photograph at Shayne.

"There, you want to see the woman!" The widow laughed.

Shayne picked up the photo-

graph. It was a small picture of Max McGraw with his arm around Lucille Cheval.

"Cheval says Max had a woman, huh?" Blanche McGraw sneered. "What a sucker."

Shayne stared down at the picture. There was something peculiar about it. It was blurred, a little hazy, as if Lucille and McGraw had been moving when it was taken. The background was not a house, or a room in a house or apartment. It was an office. Shayne could see the filing cabinets and a desk. There was a glass door faint in the background.

Then Shayne saw that Lucille Cheval had a hat on. A wide brimmed hat of the type Greta Garbo had made famous. She was carrying a large straw bag open at the top.

As he looked at the picture he realized that McGraw was staring directly at the camera, but Lucille Cheval wasn't. The woman seemed to have no idea her picture was being taken. Then Shayne understood. The office, the hat, the blur of movement, the woman not looking at the camera. The picture had been taken by a hidden camera, probably in Max McGraw's office! It had all the smell of blackmail.

"A real sucker," Blanche McGraw sneered. "The big-time gambler! I found that with the five grand, peeper, and it ain't all. Look at this if you want a motive."

The woman held out a handful of narrow pieces of paper. Shayne took them. They were checks. Or, actually, the photostats of checks. They were all for two-hundred dollars, and they were signed by Lucille Cheval!

"You two stay right here!" Shayne snapped.

He spun on his heel and walked out of the dingy room. He wanted to talk to Ray Incavo about an alibi.

IX

THE SUN WAS almost down as Mike Shayne parked in the lot of *The Blue Parrot*. He strode through the bar and dining room. At the door into the gambling rooms, one of Incavo's hard boys held a hand out like a traffic cop.

Shayne brushed past him. The man clucked like a hen and reached for the house telephone. By the time Shayne was at the door of Incavo's office, three more hard types were waiting for him.

"Relax, boys," Shayne said. "It's a social call. Tell Incavo I just want some conversation."

A few minutes later Shayne was seated comfortably in one of Incavo's expensive office chairs. The chubby gambler sat behind his desk with a small film of sweat on his fat face. Shayne had already asked his questions.

"Yeh," Incavo said, "Cheval got here just about nine. My bar-

tender would know for sure. Why?"

"Max McGraw," Shayne said.

"McGraw? I heard Painter had the guy who did that on ice?" Incavo said.

"Maybe, but I don't buy it," Shayne said.

Incavo looked thoughtful. "Cheval would be a good suspect, only he was here, like he said. Lucille came in right after him. They had dinner and Cheval gambled some later. Lucille went home."

"Why would Cheval be a good suspect?" Shayne snapped.

"He didn't like McGraw much," Incavo said.

"Because of Lucille? Was she playing with McGraw?"

"There were rumors," Incavo admitted. "I never could figure it, not with a punk like McGraw. Only they were seen."

"Seen?" Shayne said.

"Yeh, seen around, talking, you know."

"Did Cheval know?"

"Maybe and maybe not. He was always funny about Lucille. He kept her under wraps, and she was never with him when he worked. He worked a lot, so she had plenty of chances, and maybe Cheval didn't know."

"But you don't think so?"

"Cheval's a smart man," Incavo said. "And dangerous. For the record, I never said a word."

"How long was he here?"

"You mean last night? Well, Lucille left about ten-fifteen. Cheval played some blackjack until maybe eleven. He left then. Lucille came back about twelve-twenty. And that's funny, too, because she was asking after Max McGraw."

Shayne narrowed his grey eyes. He watched Incavo. Lucille Cheval had been looking for Max McGraw!

"She was asking for McGraw about eleven-twenty?" Shayne said.

"Yeh," Incavo said. "She even came back again about half past one. It was funny, too, because Cheval never let her come into my place alone."

"She was asking after McGraw at one-thirty too?" Shayne said.

"She sure was. My barman got the idea she was making the rounds, because she asked him if he knew where McGraw hung out."

"What do you know about her?"

"Not much, Shayne. Her name was Lucille Watson before she married Cheval about four years ago. I think she came from San Francisco."

Shayne stood up. "One more thing, Incavo. Where do I find Cheval now?"

"Now? Let's see. Yeh, he's nearly always in his office about now. Until maybe eight-thirty. Then he comes to eat here."

"Do you have the address?"

"Sure, here," Incavo said, scribbling on a pad.

Before pocketing the slip of paper the gambler passed to him Shayne scanned it thoughtfully, tugging at his left earlobe. The address was not far away. He nodded to Incavo and strode out of the gambler's office. In the bar section of *The Blue Parrot,* Shayne went to the telephone booth. He called Tim Rourke. The reporter had no further news. Shayne cut him short.

"Tim, I want you to find out all you can about the past of Lucille Cheval. Name used to be Watson, probably from San Francisco. Okay?"

"Will do, Mike."

Shayne hung up and stalked from the bar. Dusk was just settling over Miami as he reached his car. He drove the few blocks to Larry Cheval's office. He parked across the street from the low office building and looked at his watch. It was just 8:15. Shayne started to get out of the car. He froze with one foot out through his open door.

Larry Cheval's office was in a six story office building right next door to the building where Max McGraw had been found!

Shayne blinked as he stared up at the buildings. They were identical. Shayne looked down at the address in his hand. There was no mistake. Larry Cheval's office was on the fifth floor of the building next to the office building of Hedges & Hedges.

Shayne looked from one building to the other. He observed that the two buildings exactly joined in the row of low office buildings. He sat back in his car and closed the door.

At precisely 8:30 Larry Cheval came out of his building. A car materialized from nowhere and picked up the gambler and drove off. Shayne got out of his car and walked to the lobby door of Cheval's building.

X

THE NIGHT WATCHMAN of Cheval's building opened the door into the small lobby. The man looked inquiringly at Shayne.

Shayne flashed his badge. "Police," he snapped. "Have to check your roof. You have the key?"

The man blinked and nodded. "Sure, sure. You want me to come with you?"

"No, just give me the key. I'll be up there a while."

"Okay. Is it about that killing next door? Say, that was something, huh? My first day, too."

"You're lucky," Shayne said drily.

He took the key and strode into the single elevator. It was similar to the one in the building next door. He rode to the sixth floor, to guard against the possibility that the watchman below was watching the indicator lights. He left the elevator and walked down the stairs

to the fifth floor. Unlike the offices of Hedges & Hedges next door, the fifth floor of this building was made up of small offices that opened off a corridor.

Shayne found Cheval's office near the elevator. It took him only a few moments to open the door with one of the keys on his ring of special keys.

The office was dark. As Shayne stepped in, the spring lock on the door clicked behind him. He switched on the light. It was a small, but well-furnished office. There was only one window that faced out on a court at the rear of the building. The first thing that Shayne saw was the desk set.

There was a paper knife, a pen, a pencil, and ink-stand, a curved blotter, and a three-compartment receptacle for paper clips, rubber bands, etc. All the pieces had clear plastic handles. The ink stand was clear plastic. The three-sectioned receptacle was clear plastic. All the pieces had the running horse encapsulated inside them.

There was no paper weight.

Shayne bent to look closely at the desk. He noticed a small, almost hidden gash in the edge of the desk-top, as if something had struck against it. Shayne searched the floor directly below the marking. There were three faint stains, close together. They were small, but when he bent down to examine them more closely he became convinced that they were bloodstains.

He straightened up and began to search every inch of the office. He found nothing more until he opened a door and saw a small bathroom.

On the first shelf of the bathroom-cabinet there were women's articles. A lipstick, orange boards, blonde hair pins, cuticle scissors, mascara—and a bottle of perfume. Shayne sniffed the perfume. It was the same perfume that had been on the note in Max McGraw's pocket.

Shayne held the bottle of perfume for a long time before he put it back into the cabinet. He turned and left the bathroom. He

sat down behind Larry Cheval's desk to think.

Shayne had no doubt now that Max McGraw had been stabbed to death in this office. The note had been written by someone close to Lucille Cheval. Max McGraw had come to Larry Cheval's office. McGraw had had an appointment. McGraw had been slain here.

Somehow, for some unknown reason, McGraw had put Larry Cheval's paperweight into his pocket. Perhaps the dead man had been trying to point a finger at his killer, or perhaps he simply liked to steal small objects. It made no difference. Max McGraw had died in *this* office—not next door in the office of Morris Babel.

And there was the problem. How had Max McGraw gotten from this office, in this building, to Morris Babel's office in the building next door? Babel said he had heard the noises between 9:15 and 9:25.

But at that time Larry Cheval and his wife were having dinner at *The Blue Parrot* in full view of Ray Incavo, his bartenders and waiters, and perhaps fifty other people. There was no way. They could have killed McGraw, but not taken the body next door.

Shayne tugged slowly on his earlobe. There was another problem. Cheval had men who could have carried a body next door for him. But how would they get past two watchmen? Over the roofs. All right, but where did they get keys to *both* roof doors? And, more important, why would Cheval have the body dumped in the office of some stranger who had no connection to McGraw? Cheval would have had a better plan for disposing of a body.

Unless Larry Cheval had killed McGraw on the spur of the moment!

Trapped in his office with a dead body, an appointment to keep at nine o'clock, and a watchman roaming the building, Cheval could have taken the only way out. Get one of his men to dump the body anywhere. Then why not just on the roof? Because they wanted a suspect. Fine, but how would Cheval have known Babel was next door working?

Puzzled, Shayne left Cheval's office, letting the door lock behind him. He walked back up to the sixth floor and took the elevator down to the lobby. The watchman looked at him expectantly.

Shayne made his face stern. "Did you notice anyone unusual, or some stranger, in this building last night?" he said.

"Me? No, sir, only I wasn't here all night. Like I said before, that was my first night."

Shayne stared at the watchman. "Your first night?"

"I'm just a temporary. The regular watchman had to go visit his sister in Palm Beach," the man said. "She's real sick, I heard. He

left last night around nine-thirty. I filled in. I'm filling in for a couple of weeks."

"Palm Beach?" Shayne said.

Shayne began to tug very hard on his earlobe. His grey eyes narrowed to steely slits. An idea had crossed his mind. An idea so simple it could just be possible.

"Tell me something, do you have a key to the roof door in the next building?" Shayne said.

"Next door," the man said. The man hesitated, grew red, seemed to be trying to think of what to say. At last he gulped. "Well, yeh, I do. I wasn't supposed to tell no one. I mean, they ain't supposed to trade keys, only they do so that they can cover for each other in case one of 'em feels like a drink, or—"

"What's his name!"

"Huh. Oh, it's Joe Murray."

"His sister's name and address?" Shayne snapped. "Do you have that? The address in Palm Beach. The telephone number!"

"Wait a minute—yeh, here it is," and the temporary watchman began to read a slip of paper.

The substitute watchman read no more than two words before Shayne snatched the paper from his hand and vanished out of the building on the dead run.

XI

CHIEF OF DETECTIVES Peter Painter glared morosely around his office. In the morning light the dapper Chief looked tired. He was tired. It did not make him feel friendly to the seven people in the office with him.

"If Shayne doesn't show in ten minutes so help me I'll have his hide when he does get here!" Painter said. "What the devil is it all about anyway—don't any of you know?"

Tim Rourke shook his head. "All I know is that Mike called from Palm Beach and told me to tell you to get them all here this morning if you didn't want to make a fool of yourself."

Rourke looked around Painter's office at the others. Morris Babel and his wife sat close together whispering. Anna Babel looked more tired than her accused husband. Blanche McGraw and Sam Kowalski looked more than tired, they looked three-quarters dead. The effects of yesterday's binge was all over their grey faces. There was stark fear, too, on their grey faces.

Only Larry Cheval seemed unconcerned. The gambler had made the loudest protest when Painter's men had called for him, but now he sat calm and collected. Cheval was accustomed to this sort of thing. Lucille Cheval looked as beautiful as ever, but she could not hide a certain nervousness as she watched her husband.

"Can't you tell us what this is all about, Chief Painter?" Lucille Cheval said.

Just as Painter was about to make an acid reply, the door to his office opened and Mike Shayne strode in. The big detective seemed none the worse for his almost twenty-four hours without sleep. Shayne nodded to everyone, and grinned at Painter.

"Good work, Painter, everyone's here," Shayne said.

"Now that you are," Painter growled. "This better be good."

"Getting a killer is always good," Shayne said. "Almost as good as freeing an innocent man."

'If he's innocent," Peter Painter said.

"You don't have a single piece of concrete evidence yet, do you?"

"Aside from catching him red-handed," Painter said drily.

"Really red-handed, Chief? Then that spindle checked out as the murder weapon?" Shayne said.

"He could have cleaned it, Shayne," Painter said. "But you go ahead, I'm all ears."

Shayne smiled. The big redhead let his glance go slowly around the room. All the people in the room were watching him. Shayne began to pace back and forth.

"I'm going to tell a story," Shayne said, "so don't interrupt, okay? Not until I'm finished."

"Never mind the drama, Shayne," Painter said. "Just tell it."

Shayne continued to pace the office as he talked, his grey eyes flashing from face to face.

"Max McGraw wasn't killed by Morris Babel, or even in Babel's office building," he said. "McGraw was a small-time punk. The last six months or so he had a pile of money. He had a big deal going. Right, Blanche?"

"So he said," Blanche McGraw agreed.

"The deal was Lucille Cheval. She was having an affair with McGraw, and tipping him off when Cheval fixed a race, or a fight, or a game. McGraw got money down on the fix and was cleaning up. Lucille even gave him money herself. She—"

Larry Cheval was on his feet. The gambler's face was distorted with rage. "You lousy lying two-bit—" he roared.

Painter snapped, "Shut up, Cheval. Let Shayne finish. Later we'll both take care of him. Go on, Shayne."

Shayne smiled pleasantly at Cheval who slowly sat down as if it was all he could do to keep himself from clawing at Shayne's throat.

"Well, I suppose McGraw got greedy. He wanted more, bigger and better tips. He got Lucille to let him into Cheval's office to look around. She sent him a note telling him when. It reeked of her perfume. *When* was last night, at eight forty-five. McGraw showed up at just before nine o'clock. Only Cheval was waiting for him. Cheval had found out about the affair

with Lucille, and Cheval killed McGraw in that office. Then—"

This time it was Painter who was unable to keep silent any longer. The Chief of Detectives went up like a skyrocket.

"Last night, Shayne, from nine until well past ten Cheval was at dinner! You know that, because you told Rourke to tell me to check this morning! You also told Rourke to tell me to check Cheval's men for that time, and they all have clear alibies! Now how did McGraw get from Cheval's office to Babel's? *Walk?*"

"As a matter of fact," Shayne said blandly, "you could almost say he did!"

Shayne left them all sitting with their mouths open, and walked to the office door. He opened it and motioned to someone to come into the office. The man who came in, holding his hat in his nervous hands was tall and skinny and about fifty years old. His hair was grey and his face was frightened. His big, powerful hands opened and closed on the brim of his hat.

"I'd like you all to meet Joe Murray," Shayne said. "Joe has a story to tell also. You know, Painter, one thing was wrong about all this right from the start. You really knew it yourself."

"What was that, Shayne?" Painter snapped.

"That Morris Babel was just *too* innocent. When you find a man standing over a body all alone, you jump to only two possible conclusions: that he killed the man, or that he has been framed. When someone frames a man, the framed-person should have some logical motive and connection to the dead man. Babel had absolutely no connection. His story was so innocent it was ridiculous. It made no sense because McGraw had no reason to be there alive or dead!"

"Now listen, Shayne, if you—" Painter began.

Shayne nodded to the tall, grey man named Joe Murray.

"Okay, Joe, tell the Chief what happened the way I told you to tell it," Shayne said.

"Sure, Mr. Shayne," the nervous man said. "I didn't mean no harm, Chief. I mean, I come down from the sixth floor on my rounds and there was this guy lying in the hall, and—"

"Whoa," Painter said, "just who is this, Shayne?"

"Mr. Murray is the regular watchman in Cheval's building next door to where we found McGraw," Shayne said. "Go on, Joe."

Painter was staring now with his mouth wide open under his pencil mustache. Even Rourke could not take his eyes from the tall, grey-haired watchman.

"Well, like I said, I found this guy lying in the hall on the fifth floor. He reeked of whisky and he was breathing real hard, see? So I figured he was a drunk who'd passed out in my hall. I didn't

know what office he'd come out of. They were all dark at that time."

"What time?" Painter snapped, his mouth suddenly closing like a steel trap.

"Maybe ten after nine," the watchman said. "That was the trouble. I mean, you see, my sister she's real sick. She'd called me that day, and I got permission to take a couple of weeks off. I was gettin' a ten o'clock bus for Palm Beach. I figured if I called the cops like I'm supposed to, I'd get stuck.

"I mean, we're supposed to report anything like that, and wait for the cops to come, and answer questions, and all that. I'd have missed my bus, see? So I got this idea. I picked the guy up and carried him up to the roof and down into the top office in the next building. Me and the watchman over in the next building we got each other's roof keys just to help each other out.

"Well, I carried the guy down and put him on the floor in that sixth floor office. I was going to make some noise so Pete, he's the watchman over in the next building, would hear and find the guy. Only I saw this light in one of the small offices in Hedges and Hedges, and I knew someone was there. I got scared when he called out, and beat it back up to the roof."

The tall, grey-haired watchman stopped. His frightened face looked around the room pleadingly. He turned his hat around and around in his big hands.

"I mean, I didn't know he was dead. I just thought he was some drunk."

In the silence they all looked at the watchman.

XII

MIKE SHYANE was the first to speak. "You see, the wound hardly bled at all. The ME said McGraw didn't die right away. The killer left him in Cheval's office intending to come back later. But McGraw revived and staggered out into the hall. Murray found him. He was still alive but unconscious. He must have died while Murray was carrying him. I'll bet the killer was really surprised when he came back to dispose of the body."

Painter rubbed his mustache. "Then Cheval could easily have killed McGraw. He didn't show up at *The Blue Parrot* until nine o'clock, and—"

"And he had the motive," Shayne said. "That paperweight in McGraw's pocket came from Cheval's office. There's blood on the rug in Cheval's office, and I'm pretty sure it'll prove to be McGraw's type. The note—"

Cheval was on his feet again. "Damn you, I was out of that office at eight-thirty and you know it! Are you all crazy? I didn't kill McGraw, I didn't have any reason.

You've got it all wrong! Lucille wouldn't cheat on me with a punk like that! Go on, Lucille, tell them!"

The beautiful blonde looked at her angry husband. Then she looked at Shayne. The big detective was holding the picture of her and McGraw. Her wide blue eyes looked straight at the picture. Then there were tears in her eyes.

"Oh, Larry, I'm so sorry," Lucille said sadly. "They know, don't you see? I never wanted you to find out. I didn't know you had found out! Oh, Larry—"

Larry Cheval blinked. His eyes flicked around the room like the eyes of a caged animal.

"You shouldn't have done it, darling," Lucille Cheval said. "I'm not worth it!"

Cheval stood there staring at his wife. His face was no longer angry. It was only deadly pale.

Shayne spoke quietly. "She's not worth it, Cheval."

The gambler did not move or look away from the face of his wife. Shayne nodded to Joe Murray the watchman.

"All right, Joe," Shayne said. "Tell the rest. Did you see Cheval leave the building that night?"

"Yes, sir, at eight-thirty like always," Murray said.

"And you didn't see McGraw go in?"

"No, sir, I'd started my rounds by then. He must have had a key. Otherwise he would have rung the big bell we have so I'd go down and let him in. It rings in the elevator, you know."

"I think one of the key's we found on McGraw will fit the front lobby door of Cheval's building," Shayne said. "Go on, Joe. Who else did you see leave the building."

"No one, but I saw Mrs. Cheval leave her office. I was just finished checking the fifth floor. I was in the elvator and saw her come out of her office and turn out the lights. That was about a couple minutes to nine."

Shayne nodded. "She had to leave the body because she had her dinner date with Cheval. When she came back later McGraw was gone, so she panicked. She assumed he was still alive. She started looking for him, going into places Cheval never wanted her to go. When she read in the morning about McGraw being found, she went down to McGraw's office and planted that phony file on Babel. She knew Babel's name because she had Cheval find out through his police connections.

"Cheval couldn't have been jealous. There wasn't any affair. Rourke there checked and found out that Lucille is a compulsive gambler. She has a record of three gambling arrests in San Francisco alone. That was why Cheval wouldn't let her go near a gambling house or any of his gambler associates. But she bet with Mc-

Graw. She got in so deep she had to sell McGraw tips on Cheval's fixes to pay off. I found photostats of checks she paid to McGraw, a lot of money. He kept them for blackmail. It was Lucille's IOU's in McGraw's wallet."

Lucille Cheval jumped up. The beautiful blonde was pale, but she sneered at Shayne.

"Lies and guesses! You're just guessing, Shayne!"

Shayne agreed. "Yes, I'm just guessing about a lot of it, but you were seen with McGraw. We've got that picture and those photostats of your checks. And you've got a record of gambling."

Then Larry Chevel spoke for the first time since Shayne had accused his wife. Cheval's voice was low. "She never could resist," he said.

"No, she couldn't," Shayne said. "And I'm not guessing about the murder. The note is sure to be in her handwriting, and it smells of her perfume. She was seen leaving the office at nine o'clock. We can prove McGraw was killed in that office. And the only place and time he could have picked up that paperweight was in the office that night."

"He could have picked up that paperweight any time!" Lucille Cheval cried.

"Cheval?" Shayne said.

The gambler was still standing in the center of Painter's office as pale as death. He did not move for a few long seconds after Shayne had spoken to him. Then he moved, turned away from his wife, nodded toward Mike Shayne.

"The paperweight was in the office when I left at eight-thirty," he said slowly. "So was Lucille. She told me she had a headache. She was resting on the couch. I left the paperweight on some papers, I remember. She didn't want to join me for dinner, but I insisted."

Lucille Cheval began to sway where she stood. The beautiful blonde stared at her husband. Her voice was a whisper. "Larry . . . please."

Cheval shrugged. "They've got one of us. It's you or me. You were going to frame me, honey. You were throwing *me* to them."

Lucille Cheval sat down hard, her face in her hands. Peter Painter now stepped forward. The chief of Detectives was looking eager.

"The weapon, Shayne," Painter said.

Shayne picked up the picture of McGraw and Lucille.

"There's a straw bag in this picture," Shayne said. "And Joe Murray says Lucille was carrying the same bag that night. Does your wife knit, Cheval?"

"Yeh," Cheval said, "she knits. She learned it in jail in Frisco. The watchman is right. She did have her needles with her that night. She brought them to *The Blue Parrot*. She's only got the two. I guess she was afraid I'd wonder if she

threw them away. I'll show you where they are."

"Even if she cleaned the needle, there'll probably be blood traces," Shayne said.

"There usually is," Painter said.

Then Lucille Cheval began to laugh. It was a low, chilling laugh, half-laughing and half-crying. Like the hysteria of a small, trapped animal. Suddenly the woman tossed her blonde hair and began to smile at everyone in the room. She smiled brightly at Blanche McGraw.

"He was an animal, you know. I did the widow a favor," Lucille said now. "He let me lose and lose. I couldn't pay any more. He made me tell him when Larry fixed a race or a game so he could win. But it wasn't enough. He would have bled me white and still told Larry some day. Larry swore he'd leave me if I ever gambled again. I couldn't let Larry find out, could I?"

Lucille smiled at everyone in the room. "He's a small man. I thought if I killed him with that needle I could get him out while Mr. Murray was on his rounds. I poured whisky on him to make him seem drunk. But he was late, and Larry had insisted I join him at dinner. If I could have gotten him out of the building and dumped him into the Bay, no one would have guessed. He had so many enemies.

"I said I had a headache, you see, and couldn't have dinner. But Larry insisted, and McGraw was late. I had to kill him then, for it would have been too late after he had seen Larry's files. So I killed him. But there was no time. No one would have gone into that office, you see? But he wasn't there when I came back! He wasn't there! He was gone! He'd just . . . walked . . . away . . ."

In the office they all sat in silence and looked at Lucille Cheval. Larry Cheval had turned away. Painter picked up his interoffice telephone. Shayne lighted a cigarette and sat down and closed his tired eyes. Only Tim Rourke was really busy. Rourke left the office. The lean reporter had a story to write.

A NEW COMPLETE MIKE SHAYNE NOVELET NEXT MONTH

THE OLD ONES

The crime was long-forgotten and Ada Canby knew that dead men tell no tales. That made her doubly anxious to catch every word her dying boarder had to say.

by HENRY SLESAR

IF ADA CANBY had any thought of pulling the wool over her grandson's eyes, Mr. Paulson's hacking cough changed her mind. She slowed down the tempo of her rocker, and looked towards the hall stairway with a girlish blush on cheeks that were seventy-five years old.

Her grandson, Walter, followed the movement of her eyes, and said: "Who's up there, Grandma? Come on, I heard the coughing. Who is it?"

"It's only Mr. Paulson," Ada said.

"And who the hell is Mr. Paulson?"

"You needn't swear, Walter," the old lady said, stiffening her small shoulders and feeling a pleasant surge of defiance. "Mr. Paulson is a very nice gentleman from South America. I mean, he's an American, really, but he's been living in South America for the past ten years—"

"I don't want his biography, Grandma. I just want to know what he's doing here."

"Why, he's boarding here, of course."

In the second floor bedroom, the object of their contention coughed again, rackingly. The sound interrupted Walter's next angry phrase.

Walter swallowed it, and said: "You never told me about a boarder."

"I'm sorry Walter. I didn't want to worry you about my financial

ARE HARD TO KILL

problems. You see, the money from your grandfather's estate is just about gone. I didn't want to ask you for help, so I did the only sensible thing."

"I could have managed something. You make too much of this independence business, Grandma. You always have."

Ada Canby frowned. "I will not sponge off my grandchildren! Besides, there are too many rooms in this old house. There's no reason why I shouldn't share them. It's been a good deal less lonely for me, too."

Now it was her grandson's turn to look guilty. He covered it with a solicitude that wasn't entirely feigned. "Well, I just hope he's all right. You've got to be awful careful, taking in strangers."

"There's nothing wrong with Mr. Paulson," the old lady assured him.

"He doesn't sound so healthy," Walter said dryly.

"He's had a bad cold for the past couple of weeks. When *you* had a bad cold, Walter, I used to rub your chest with camphor oil and sit up half the night with you."

He smiled suddenly, boyishly, and took her wrinkled hand. "All right, Grandma, I'm sorry. I can't help worrying about you, living all alone so far away. I just wish there was somebody to take care of you—not the other way 'round."

"You're a good boy, Walter," Ada said.

He left half an hour later, driving off in his new convertible, his dutiful visit over for another year. The old lady closed the front door quietly, and looked up the stairs towards the sound of Mr. Paulson's repeated, painful, chest-tearing coughs.

SOMEWHERE IN the region between midnight and dawn, she heard the cough again, and it had a voice. It spoke her name, imploringly, and for a moment she thought it was the voice of David, her son, dead these last thirteen years. She opened her eyes, and remembered her boarder.

"Mr. Paulson?" she said aloud.

She got out of bed, nimble for her age, and slipped on the voluminous robe that Walter had brought her two visits ago.

"Mrs. Canby . . ."

She knew it was a cry for help, and the knowledge brought a sharp stab of doubt. She was an old lady, after all. The strength and independence she boasted of —wasn't that only pride? But she hurried down the hall, and rapped on Mr. Paulson's door.

"Mrs. Canby . . . please . . ."

She pushed open the door. As soon as she did, Mr. Paulson's blue finches fluttered wildly against their wire cage. A demanding wind made the window shade clatter against the glass.

And Mr. Paulson, his unshaven face ghastly in the light of the single table lamp near his bed, groaned and held out a wasted hand.

For a moment, Ada did nothing more than stare. She hadn't seen her boarder for days, had only heard the harsh evidence of his illness. Mr. Paulson took care of his own needs and meals; he had wanted it that way from the beginning. He was like her: full of pride, and fiercely independent. But now it was something else —dying.

"Mr. Paulson!" Ada gasped. "Why didn't you tell me you were so sick? I would have called a doctor."

"No," he said. "Too late now, Mrs. Canby."

"Don't be silly!" She started to leave, but his fingers grasped the folds of her robe and tugged at it with the force of final desperation.

"Mrs. Canby! Listen to me, please! Don't go yet!"

"You need help, Mr. Paulson!"

"Dying!"

"No, no!" she said, her eyes filling. "If you'll only let me call a doctor—"

"Confession!"

"Do you want a priest? Is that what you want?"

"No time," he gasped. His was a face without features; all she could see were his wide, red-flecked eyes. "Listen, Mrs. Canby. Richardson—murdered—ten years ago—"

"What?"

"Murder! I did it. I killed him for money. I was paid, Mrs. Canby! And Lindell is innocent!"

"Oh, Lord!" the old lady said.

"Do you understand me? Do you? Richardson, Mrs. Canby, remember! I did it—nobody else—not that man Lindell. Will you tell them?"

"Let me get help!" Ada Canby pleaded. "You can tell them yourself, Mr. Paulson. The police, the doctor—"

"Tell them to free Lindell! Tell them I'm the one who killed Richardson ten years ago."

"I don't know anything about it, Mr. Paulson! I don't *want* to know!" She began to sob, pushing at his bony fingers. "I'm an old woman. I don't want to get mixed up in anything like that."

She broke his grip at last, and ran from the room.

By the time she reached the telephone, she realized why it had become so easy to detach his clutching fingers from her robe. Mr. Paulson had slipped his grasp on all things earthly.

Poor Mr. Paulson, she wrote in a letter to Walter the following day. *If only he hadn't been so stubborn and told me how ill he was. It was pneumonia, the interne told me, and you know how much they can do these days with antibiotics and such. I'm keeping*

his things until the police can learn more about him. The poor man seems to have nobody at all in this country who knew or cared for him.

She was on the verge of writing more, of telling Walter about Paulson's strange confession. But she had resisted the temptation of mentioning it even to the police. Why tell her grandson?

The house seemed lonelier than ever that night. Even the gentle chirps of the finches in the upstairs bedroom didn't dispell the emptiness.

"Poor birdies," Ada said, her hands moving crochet needles idly. "You miss your friend, don't you? Maybe you'd like it better here, in the parlor?" But no, she decided. They were his birds. She still thought of the room as his.

Poor Mr. Paulson.

A murderer.

She clucked her tongue, and made the needles move faster. Mr. Paulson was no murderer. She was too good a judge of character to believe that. It was the sickness talking, not Mr. Paulson. It had been a fantasy of delirium, the nightmare of a dying man.

What were the names he had spoken?

Richardson.

Lindell.

Lindell is innocent.

Her heart began to pound, knocking against her fragile rib cage. She became alarmed. She stood up, fighting for a breath of air to soothe that palpitating heart.

Lindell is innocent!

"Oh, dear God!" Ada said aloud. "What if it's true? If Mr. Paulson actually murdered this Richardson? And—*Lindell is innocent!*"

But who was Lindell?

Not thinking of the sense of her actions, only moved by the desire to do something, she went to the telephone book.

Lindells! By the dozen!

"Foolish old woman," she said.

She was about to close the book, slam it, in fact, with decision and finality. But she saw something else, and all palpitation ceased. Her heart seemed to stop, its beat suspended, as she read the listing:

Lindell & Richardson, Investments, 9 Concourse, REgent 28-0100.

There they were, joined by coincidence, perhaps. The victim and the accused. Side by side.

"Foolish, foolish!" she said aloud. And then, firmly, to the darkness, to the opened book, perhaps even to the ghost of the dead boarder: "I'm going to bed!"

But in the morning, she called REgent 28-0100, and asked for Mr. Lindell.

"I'm sorry, but Mr. Lindell is no longer with the firm. I can connect you with Mr. Chelton—"

"What about Mr. Richardson

then? May I talk to him?"

"I'm sorry, but neither Mr. Richardson *nor* Mr. Lindell is actually—"

"Where is Richardson? Dead, perhaps?"

"Why, yes," the woman said, "as a matter of fact, he is."

"How long?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"How long has Mr. Richardson been dead? Is that such a difficult question?"

"Mr. Chelton," the woman said feebly, and then a man's voice, oozing sweetness, came to her rescue. "Hello! May I be of service?"

"Maybe you can," Ada said. "Maybe I've got money to invest. The least you can do is tell me what I want to know."

"Yes, Madam, surely."

"I want to know about your Mr. Richardson, how long ago he died. I think I did business with him once, a long time ago."

"Well, it's ten years, madam, just about. Now if you'll just describe your needs—"

"I'll think about it," Ada snapped, and hung up, her lips set in tight lines.

She did think about it. Thought clearly. Age hadn't addled her. She decided that it was no use guessing about Mr. Paulson's confession. If a crime had been committed, if a man had been unjustly condemned, there would be a record of it someplace, a newspaper account. But she wouldn't tell the police, not until she was sure. Really *sure*. The thought of leather boots in her parlor made her feel faint.

In two wearisome days, treking between the public library and the offices of the local newspaper, she finally located the story, a decade old.

BROKER INDICTED FOR MURDER OF PARTNER

There were the names. Harvey Richardson, the slain. John Lindell, the accused. There were the motives: Quarrels over operating costs. A misuse of investment funds, each partner blaming the other. And the witnesses: a Park Avenue doorman. An elevator operator. And a man named Chelton.

Only one name was absent.

Paulson.

THERE WAS NOTHING lavish about the office. It had been designed for an impression of solidity. Money was the commodity of Lindell & Richardson, and money was solid, serious stuff. The old lady knew she looked very much at home in the anteroom; she might have been a rich widow inquiring after her portfolio. When she asked for Mr. Chelton, the girl at the desk was immediately cooperative.

Chelton was an extravagantly well-fed man. He was in his late fifties, but any wrinkle that might

have marred his sleek exterior had been rounded out with flesh. Everything about him gave the impression of strong sensual appetite, except his bored, unhungry eyes.

"Yes, Mrs. Canby," he said, pronouncing the name carefully, trying to associate it with some image of wealth. "How can we be of help to you?"

"You can't," she said crisply. "I've come to help you. Or rather, somebody you know."

An eyebrow arched.

"Mr. John Lindell," Ada said. "The man who was supposed to have murdered Mr. Richardson."

A plump finger scraped a cheek.

"Did you know Mr. Lindell?"

"No, I didn't," Ada said. "Nor Mr. Richardson, for that matter. The party I knew was named Paulson."

"I'm afraid I'm not following you, Mrs. Canby."

"I rented a room to a Mr. Paulson. He wasn't well. He died last week, of pneumonia. I was there when it happened."

"That's unfortunate. But—"

"But before he died, Mr. Paulson told me something about Mr. Richardson's murder. He said Mr. Lindell hadn't been responsible for it, that he—Mr. Paulson—had committed it. For money. I don't mean that he robbed Mr. Richardson or anything like that. He was *paid*."

"Paid?"

"That's what he told me. He didn't have to say anything about it, Mr. Chelton, don't you see? But he was dying, and he knew it. People don't like to die with something like that on their conscience. So he confessed the truth."

Chelton seemed to want to stand up. He pushed himself halfway out of the chair, but the effort to hoist his bulk seemed too great. He sank back again. His color was bad.

"It was this man Lindell," Ada said. "That's what bothered him so much, because Lindell was in prison for something he didn't do. I thought you should know this, Mr. Chelton, because you knew them both. I mean, the newspaper article I read said you were close to them both."

"Mrs. Canby!" the man said, in a pained voice. "My dear woman!"

"What?"

"I don't know what silly story you heard." He laughed brokenly. "Well, the thing's completely insane! There wasn't any *question* about what happened. This man, whatever his name is, merely had an obsession."

"I don't think so, Mr. Chelton. I was hoping you'd want to follow through on this business—tell the police. See that Mr. Lindell is freed."

"On evidence like *that*?"

"I don't know anything about evidence!" Ada said miserably. "I'm just telling you what I *heard*. If you won't do anything about it, I suppose I'll just have to tell the police myself."

"Wait!"

Now he was out of the chair.

"Wait," he said softly. "Before you do that, Mrs. Canby, before you do anything, let me tell you something. Let me put your mind at rest. John Lindell is no longer in prison."

"No longer?"

"He's dead," Chelton said. gravely. "He's been dead for the last three years, Mrs. Canby. He wasn't a young man when all this happened."

"He died—in prison?"

Chelton sighed deeply in affirmation. They both thought of eternity for a moment. Then he said: "Even if all you say is true, that this man was Richardson's murderer, you can't help John Lindell any longer. He's beyond that."

"But his name?" Ada said weakly. "Don't you want to clear his name? Shouldn't people be told that he's innocent?"

"Have you any proof? Any living witness?"

"Just myself!"

"But you'd be willing to tell the police, involve yourself in their questioning? Start a new investigation? Open the whole dreadful mess again? Mrs. Canby, did you know that John Lindell had a daughter?"

"No! But that would be all the more reason to do something."

"His daughter's married, living in Minneapolis, with a husband and three children. People have forgotten about her father's crime by now. She lives a normal, happy life."

"But her father is *innocent*."

"Innocent or guilty! Would you want that poor woman's name to be dragged through the newspapers a *second* time?" He shook his head violently, and his jowls trembled. "Believe me, Mrs. Canby! Believe me! She has suffered enough. She's entitled to a little peace—to *anonymity!* Would you take all that away from her—and her children—now?"

Ada's old heart felt squeezed. "Mr. Chelton, I just don't know what to do!"

"Forget it, Mrs. Canby!" His hand sliced through the air, a sword cutting Gordian knots. "The old wound is almost healed. Don't reopen it now."

"But it troubles me. I haven't thought of anything else since it happened. Perhaps if I saw a minister—if I had some advice from a man of God!"

Chelton brought his plump palms together with a loud *smack*.

"Mrs. Canby! Now you've said something! Now you've shown me the way! That's where our answer lies, dear woman. In prayer! In

the forgiveness of our dear Lord!"

He closed his eyes. In a state resembling ecstasy, he went to his knees. Ada was startled.

"Lord, tell us what to do!" Chelton said, his head bowed. "Give us your Divine Guidance! Show us the path of righteousness!"

"Mr. Chelton," Ada whispered.

"Help us, O Lord! Help us to understand. Teach us to forgive the sins of others. And to forget them! To forget!"

He lifted his face. There was actually a tear on his cheek. She was moved.

"Prayer, Mrs. Canby," he said. "Prayer is what we need. Let us turn this matter over to God, not to the police. It's in His hands now, don't you agree?"

"Perhaps so," she said weakly. "Since they're dead now—all of them!"

"Dead, and with God," Chelton said reverently. "In *His* court of judgment now, Mrs. Canby."

He rose from the floor, sighing. In the same motion, he took her arm and brought her to her feet. He held her hand and patted it.

"God bless you, Mrs. Canby. You did the right thing. Thank you for coming to me. Thank you very, very much."

He walked her to the door. A moment later, she was on the other side of it, blank-faced, bewildered. Chelton's secretary had a shoe on her desk, and frowned at it.

"Goddamned heel broke," she said. "Honest, the way they *cheat* you these days."

Then Ada Canby went home.

THE YOUNG MAN came to her door the following morning.

"Mrs. Canby?" he said, and pulled a racy Alpine hat from his head. He had smooth brown hair that he wore too long. "My name's Stu Winfield," he said. "I'm here about that room you have for rent."

He was her grandson's age, so Ada judged him by Walter. He was taller, better-looking, not as well-dressed. He didn't have Walter's brusqueness. He had charm.

"I'm new in town," he said. "Just arrived from Philadelphia this week. I've been staying at a hotel, but I'd like something homier." He grinned cheerfully.

"The rent is fourteen dollars a

week," Ada said. "I'm afraid I can't offer you any meals, but you can use the kitchen all you like. Would you care to see the room?"

"I sure would," he said.

He liked the room. He praised its furnishings. Even the view—of the rather scrubby backyard—pleased him. He was charmed by Mr. Paulson's blue finches, and asked if they could remain. The big kitchen, old-fashioned stove and all, was just the kind he liked.

"Reminds me of home," he said. "We had a kitchen just like it in Philly. We never even *used* the living room—just sat around the kitchen table all the time." He laughed, and Ada was pleased with her new boarder. He even paid two weeks in advance.

It was hours later, when Stu Winfield returned from a shopping trip at the corner supermarket, that she remembered that the ROOM TO LET sign had never been restored to the front window. She asked him about it, and the young man said,

"It was somebody at the hotel who recommended your place, I forget just who. I guess they saw your sign before. Say, listen, Mrs. Canby, I was going to broil a couple of small steaks tonight. Wonder if you'd accept an invitation to dinner?"

"Why, that's very kind of you, Mr. Winfield."

"Just one condition attached. Mr. Winfield, that's what they call my father. Would you call me Stuart?"

Ada caught herself simpering. But she said: "All right, Stuart, if you want me to."

A few days later she wrote Walter about him. *Really a very nice young man,* she said, *and that's a rare thing these days, isn't it?* She smile when she punctuated that sentence, visualizing Walter's surly mouth. *He's a great deal friendlier than Mr. Paulson ever was, and seems to like nothing better than to sit around evenings and talk. We talk about his home and his parents and his plans for the future. He wants to be a design engineer. I think the poor boy misses his home and family and I'm sort of a substitute for all that . . .*

Friday night, Stu Winfield came down with a cold and Ada broke her own rule and made his dinner: hot soup with thick noodles and a dumpling, roast chicken with gravy. They sat around the kitchen, the young man in a bulky bathrobe, looking feverish but contented. His illness recalled Mr. Paulson, of course, so she introduced the name of her ex-boarder.

"What sort of guy was he?" Stuart said, ladling soup.

"Very quiet. Kept to himself a good deal. He'd been in South America for a very long time."

"Doing what?"

"I'm afraid I don't know." She

stared at the kitchen linoleum, thinking about it. Of course she knew: Mr. Paulson had gone to South America for refuge. He had taken his blood money from the man who wanted Harvey Richardson death, and he had spent it on another continent.

The young man coughed. "Is something wrong, Mrs. Canby?"

"No, nothing. I was just thinking—about Mr. Paulson."

She made an impulsive decision. "I'd like to tell you about him," she said. "It still disturbs me. Maybe you can help me, Stuart."

She told him. He listened, respectfully, attentively. She recited every detail, up until the moment she left Mr. Chelton's secretary moaning over a broken heel.

He considered her story for a while. Then he said: "This guy Chelton sounds a little screwy. But screwy or not, Mrs. Canby—he's got a point."

"You really think so?"

"From a practical point of view, yes. Richardson's dead, Lindell's dead, now Paulson's dead. Nothing you can do is going to bring any of them back."

"That may be so, but—"

"And you know the police, Mrs. Canby. They'd be hounding you forever if you told them this story. You're too nice a person to be hounded, Mrs. Canby, so I'll have to take sides with Mr. Chelton. Let sleeping dogs lie."

"But there's one thing Mr. Chelton forgot. And me, too, I suppose."

"What's that?" The young man asked in surprise.

"Why, the real murderer. Even if Mr. Lindell can't be helped anymore, that doesn't mean the real murderer should get away."

"But the real murderer is dead. Paulson."

"No," Ada said stubbornly. "The killer is the man who hired Paulson, don't you see? Is it right that he should get away with it?"

She stood up so quickly that Stu Winfield became alarmed.

"Where are you going?" he asked.

"What?"

He chuckled. "I thought you were—rushing out to call a policeman or something."

"No," she said. "Sometimes I want to—but I can't. I just haven't the nerve! If I could do it in my sleep—just walk over to the telephone—"

She went to the wall phone beside the kitchen cupboard. She put her hand on the receiver.

Stu had a sudden coughing fit. Ada clucked maternally and brought him a glass of water.

"You should be in bed," she said. "If that cold gets any worse, you ought to see a doctor."

"I'm all right," he said cheerfully. "Don't worry about me."

"I didn't worry about Mr. Paulson, either. He might be here to-

day if I had . . ." Her eyes strayed to the telephone. "And I wouldn't have to worry about—this."

"You're not going to call the police, are you?"

"No," Ada said wearily. "Not tonight, anyway."

ADA CANBY fell into a heavy sleep at eleven. But just past midnight, her boarder's cough woke her. It was like hearing Mr. Paulson all over again, and the sound sent a pang through her thin chest.

Stu quieted down at one, but now Ada could no longer sleep. She looked at the ceiling for a while; and then, with a groan, got up and sat in the rocker by the window.

The moonlight was bright on the treetops.

Poor Mr. Paulson, she thought. Then she shivered.

Why was she feeling sorry for a killer? It was his victim that deserved her pity. And there were many victims. Richardson. Lindell. And Lindell's family.

And behind it all, an unknown face. An unknown hand, counting out money. An unknown mouth, speaking the words that sent Paulson on his errand of murder.

Unknown—but Ada saw a face.

It was fat, florid, sensual, its eyes bored and unhungry.

Mr. Chelton.

Ada put a hand to her chest, trying to contain the sudden flutter of her heart.

Why did she think of Chelton?

She tried to recall the words of the newspaper story. Chelton had been a chief witness of the prosecution. Chelton had been the man who had spelled out the story of the conflict between Lindell and Richardson.

Chelton had given the jury the motive.

Chelton had inherited the investment firm.

And Chelton didn't want the case re-opened. Chelton, on his knees, had prayed to God. To learn forgiveness. To learn forgetfulness.

She wanted to cry his name aloud.

Chelton!

In the morning, Stu Winfield didn't leave his room for breakfast. Ada brought it to him, on a tray.

"You're not looking much better," she said.

"I'm fine," he grinned. "Just fine, Mrs. Canby, I thought I'd take it easy this morning and let you pamper me."

"I want to tell you something, Stuart."

"Sure, go ahead."

She sat on the edge of the bed.

"It's about Mr. Paulson—and the murder."

He broke the shell of his egg carefully.

"I couldn't sleep last night,"

Ada said. "I sat up and thought about everything that happened. And I came to a conclusion that makes sense, Stuart. Terrible sense."

"And what conclusion is that, Mrs. Canby?" Winfield asked.

"That maybe the reason that Mr. Chelton was so upset with me —the reason he didn't want me to go to the police—was because he was afraid—"

The young man almost dropped his coffee cup.

"Sorry," he smiled. "I'm a little weak this morning. Didn't have such a good night myself."

"Mr. Chelton was an important witness at the trial, for the prosecution. Of course he was miles away when the murder occurred, someplace like Miami Beach, but he could have been miles away, and still—"

"Wait a minute," Stu chuckled. "Now you're playing detective, Mrs. Canby."

"He had the most to gain! If both Mr. Richardson and Mr. Lindell were out of the way."

"I'm sure the police would have thought of that."

"But they didn't! There was nothing in the stories I read that pointed any suspicion at Mr. Chelton. I don't suppose it even occurred to anyone. Now the firm is all his."

"That's not exactly evidence, Mrs. Canby."

"Then why didn't he let me go to the police? Why did he try so hard to talk me out of it? Praying!" she said angrily. "Taking the name of God in vain!"

Stu coughed, falling against his pillows.

"I'm sorry," Ada said contritely. "I shouldn't be troubling you like this, Stuart."

She stood up. "I know what to do now," she said. "I don't know why I was so stupid before. I thought I was too old to get mixed up in a thing like this. But it's just the other way around. I'm too old *not* to know what's right or wrong."

"Mrs. Canby, wait a minute. You're calling the police—right now?"

"Yes," she said. "I'll tell them what I know. They can do the rest."

She went to the door.

"Mrs. Canby!" Stu Winfield cried. "Wait, please."

"They won't bother you, Stuart. I'll get dressed and go down to the station house, and tell them everything."

She left the room and went across the hall to her bedroom. She looked in her closet for a long time before deciding on the right costume. She chose a black dress that she hadn't worn since the last funeral she had attended. She applied makeup lightly but carefully, and brushed her gray hair. She even wore jewelery—a simple strand of pearls that Walter had

given her on her last birthday.

She was fumbling with the clasp, her fingers unpracticed, when she heard the light snuffling sound on the carpet outside her door.

She stopped, puzzled, and waited until she was sure of what she had heard.

There wasn't any doubt. Stu Winfield was coming to her door, and the shuffle was the sound of his slippered feet.

"Stuart?" she said.

She opened the door and saw him. His robe and pajamas were rumpled, awry.

"Stuart, you shouldn't get out of bed."

"Don't go out, Mrs. Canby," he said. He was close enough now for her to see his flushed face, lightly washed by perspiration.

"Are you feeling worse?"

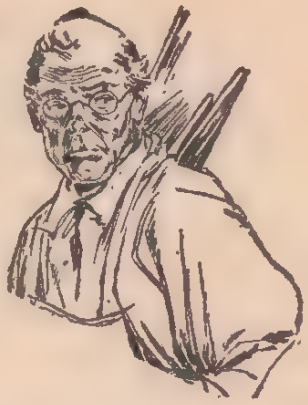
"Yes," he grinned crookedly. "A lot worse. You'd better stay here and take care of me, Mrs. Canby. Forget about the police."

"I can't forget, Stuart. It's something I have to do."

"No, it isn't." He put his hands on his hips, breathing with difficulty. "You don't have to do it, Mrs. Canby. It'll be better for both of us if you don't."

"For both of us?"

"I wouldn't have to hurt you," he said. "That's what I mean. I wouldn't have to do anything bad to you. Understand what I'm saying, Mrs. Canby?"



She knew him then. She placed him in his proper role, saw the meaning of his presence in her house. She knew, and yet refused to believe.

"Stuart, what are you talking about?"

"Come on, old lady, come on!" He swayed on his slippered feet. No charm now. "You're awful damned smart, you're a thinker! So think a little harder."

"You knew!" Ada gasped. "You knew about Lindell. That's why you came here, why you rented the room."

"I just came to watch over, you," he said. "To see that you stayed sensible."

"Chelton sent you here!"

"I was hoping you'd never change your mind, Mrs. Canby, about calling the police. I didn't want this part of it, this isn't the part I like."

He coughed, and she used the moment to try and get by him. His arm shot out and his fingers grasped her arm.

"Let me go, Stuart, please!"

"This way, old lady. This is

how you go. Nice and easy," he said.

He shoved her towards the head of the stairs. She looked down at what used to be a familiar sight, and now saw only a precipice. Her free hand reached out to try and find the support of the bannister.

"Easy, easy," Stu Winfield breathed, both arms circling her now, wheeling her about, moving her where he pleased.

"Don't! Oh, my God, Stuart, don't!" she cried. She fought him, with an old lady's strength, a struggle that seemed useless at first. But he was weak. His illness had enfeebled him and for one moment she found herself free.

"Help!" Mrs. Canby cried, before his hand slapped over her mouth, before his arm pulled her back.

"I have to," he whispered hoarsely in justification, in her ear. His breathing was labored now; his arms seemed to be tiring as he pulled her towards death. And then he coughed. The cough tore at his chest and throat, exploding with such force that his muscles relaxed spasmodically.

She broke away from him once more, but this time his lunge failed to retrieve her. It carried him forward, into space. He shouted something, and she saw his terrified face before his feet left the top step and he plummeted down the stairs. He fell hard, with bone-cracking force, but he lay at the landing alive, conscious, dumb with fury, his eyes blazing with anger not against Ada, but at his own bad luck.

THE POLICE lieutenant was named Hayes, and he didn't wear leather boots. He sat in her parlor, drinking tea like the most genteel of gentleman callers.

"Winfield's injuries don't amount to much," he told her. "Couple of broken ribs seem to be the worst of it. But he'll be a patient for some time before we can put him in prison where he belongs—with his friend Chelton."

"But if his injuries aren't serious—" Ada said.

"It's not the fall that made Winfield so sick. His case was diagnosed as simple pneumonia at first, and then somebody remembered about your last boarder, Paulson."

"But he had pneumonia, too. He died of it! Is pneumonia contagious?"

"Yes, of course. But this one is more contagious than scarlet fever. It's a pneumonia caused by a disease called psittacosis—better known as parrot fever. You get it from sick birds—like the finches in your spare room, Mrs. Canby.

"Mr. Paulson's birds?"

"I'm sorry," the lieutenant said, "but we'll have to remove and destroy them, Mrs. Canby. It must be done immediately."

"Those poor little creatures!" Ada said. "But in a way, you know—they saved my life."

Hayes smiled at her sadly. "I guess that's true, Mrs. Canby. But you can be grateful that you didn't become their victim, too. Parrot fever is so contagious that not more than one person in a thousand could be exposed to it as long as you were and escape infection. It was very close to a miracle!"

"We're hard to kill," Ada Canby said, her shoulders pulled back and her chin hard. "Didn't you know that, Lieutenant? The old ones are hard to kill."

Next Month—Another Brilliant Story by

HENRY SLESAR

The Ring of Truth

A woman who has lied shamelessly to save the man she loves may not always experience an overwhelming sense of guilt. But a stern, unbending father can make a criminal secret hard to keep . . . and when he himself is exposed as a fraud Justice can be terrifyingly mocked.

The Woman At the Pond

by HUGH B. CAVE

There are times when reason flees in the face of terror, making even a pond dangerous.

THE POND WAS Eric Carlson's creation, so cleverly done that I thought at first it was natural. He smiled when he told me it was not. Willows lined its gently sloping banks, dipping their branches

among lily pads. Sunfish fed with little popping sounds on an evening hatch of insects. A slender, attractive woman, all in black, sat on a stone bench under an ancient white oak, gazing at the water.

I glanced at Eric in surprise. When inviting me to his Connecticut estate for the weekend, he hadn't told me there would be another guest.

"Ruth's sister, Myra Cartwright," he said. "Did I tell you about her in Greece?"

"Not that I remember."

"I'd better, then, or you'll think us a bit queer. Suppose we go back to the house."

The woman on the bench did not even look up as we turned to depart.

In his study Eric gazed at me in silence for a moment before he spoke. We were good friends by this time: moments of silence between us were a natural thing. I had met him and his attractive wife, Ruth, while on a holiday in the Mediterranean a couple of months before. We had knocked about Italy and Greece together. He was an architect, one of the best and most expensive. Ruth painted.

"The woman you saw out there is Ruth's twin," he said at last. "I don't suppose you noticed the resemblance. The light wasn't too good."

I shook my head. "Sometimes even a close resemblance has to be pointed out before you actually notice it," I said.

Eric nodded understandingly. "She's been with us more than two years now. Ever since her husband died. I think I may have to fill in the pond because of her. You're a doctor, George. Perhaps you can advise me."

I waited.

"Just over two years ago," Eric went on, "Myra married a man she hardly knew. We were not really surprised. She had been ready for marriage for a long time —ever since changing from a spoiled, unhappy girl to a lovely and loving young woman. The change began when her mother remarried, letting her live her own life. Her father had died years before.

"The man Myra married was six years older than she, and she met him in Florida where he was considering the purchase of a hotel. For three weeks—she assures me they were the happiest weeks she had ever known—they swam, danced, dined, and talked. Then they returned to New York together and were married.

"Alan Blanchard had a home here in Connecticut, not more than an hour's drive from this place. He was a widower. His money—he told Myra this quite frankly—had come from his former wife. She had been exceedingly well off, there had been no children, she had left everything to him. He was

investing it in hotels. He knew a good deal about hotels, and had managed a big one in the West Indies.

"Myra knew nothing much else about him except that he was seemingly devoted to her. They spent three wonderful months at his Connecticut house and then, in June, Alan suggested a week at a fishing camp he owned in Maine.

"'Just the two of us,' he told her. 'No friends dropping in. No phone. Almost no road.'

"When Myra protested that she didn't know the first thing about fishing, he promised to teach her.

"She had been writing some letters, and when he drove to the village that evening to buy some paperback novels at the drug store she gave them to him to drop at the post office. 'Now don't forget,' she cautioned him. 'This long one is those papers Ted wanted me to sign.' Ted Ashenheim was her lawyer. She was having him rearrange her will and insurance policies.

"In the morning they got off a bit later than they had planned. In fact, the mailman was coming up the walk as they left. But it was a perfect day. They stopped at intimate little places for lunch and dinner, and darkness found them on a dirt road, deep in the Maine woods, miles beyond the last drowsy hamlet.

" 'You know something, Mrs. Blanchard?' Alan said. 'I love you.'

" 'You'd better,' Myra told him.

'I can't very well walk out from here.'

"It was true: she never could have walked out from that place. The lodge was on a wilderness lake at the end of an abandoned, eighteen-mile-long logging road. But it was a heavenly spot, serene and beautiful.

"While Alan was building a fire in the big stone fireplace, Myra went out to the car for the mail they had taken from the postman that morning. There were two letters, both for her. One was unimportant. The other was from her mother."

Interrupting his story, Eric unlocked a drawer of his study desk and silently handed me a letter. It was on expensive paper, and the handwriting was such that, right or wrong, my mind immediately saw a grim, sharp-faced woman triumphantly scratching out the words.

As you know, the letter said, *I was suspicious from the beginning. Now I am certain. Do you know how his first wife died? Has he ever told you? At last I have found out. She 'fell overboard' one night*

from a cruise ship in the Caribbean. Can you imagine a perfectly normal, healthy girl, who didn't even drink, falling over a ship's rail? I'm sure I can't. But she was his wife long enough to name him her sole beneficiary. Think of that before you commit the same fatal mistake.

Eric took the letter from me and returned it to the desk.

"Myra read that ghastly thing," he went on, "and thrust it back into its envelope as Alan, a heavy poker in his hand, turned from the fire to face her. 'Tomorrow we'll go fishing,' he was saying, 'and have a picnic lunch on the island.'

"She had become a statue, of course, staring at him.

" 'What's the matter, darling?' he said, apparently startled. 'Is something wrong?'

"She could only shake her head. Her tongue, like the rest of her, was frozen. With a frown of concern he put the poker down and reached for her hands. 'Why, you're cold,' he said. 'You're like ice. Darling, you're all in. It was that eighteen miles of bad road.'

"She nodded helplessly.

" 'You need sleep,' he said, lifting her to her feet. 'You go on up to bed while I unload the car.'

"She pretended to sleep, but it was near dawn before she stopped being aware of the vast loneliness of that place. The wind sighed in the pines. Waves slapped against the lake's rocky shore. An owl kept up a mournful complaint just outside the bedroom window. When she did fall asleep at last, she did not wake until noon.

"Alan was in the kitchen, making coffee, and her carefully applied makeup fooled him. 'Now you look more like it,' he said, embracing her. 'Hungry?'

" 'A little,' she replied.

" 'Good. Sit and talk to me while I scramble some eggs. You didn't know I could cook, did you?'

"You can imagine what thoughts must have been passing through her mind. There were so many things she did not know about him.

" 'After lunch I'll row you around the lake,' he said. 'We have both a rowboat and a canoe, in case you haven't noticed. The fish won't be biting this time of day, but we can go for a cruise.'

Cruise, she told herself. *A cruise ship in the Caribbean. And I don't swim. And he knows it.*

"She shook her head at him. 'This place needs a good cleaning. You go, while I put things straight here.'

"But he would not leave her. All afternoon he helped her about the lodge, and in the evening, with a fire again blazing in the fireplace, he read one of his paperbacks. It was a mystery story, she noticed. They all were. And she began to think—why had he refused to leave her alone? To make sure she would not take the car and escape? But to prevent that he could simply

have put the ignition key in his pocket.

"Perhaps he had, to make doubly sure.

"In the morning she was downstairs before him, and when she heard him in the bathroom she ran out to the car. The keys were not in it. He *had* taken them. But had he done so deliberately, or merely from habit?

" 'Today we *are* going fishing,' he told her. 'No excuses now. I won't listen.'

"Panic seized her for a moment, but she had prepared for it and the moment passed before he could be suspicious. 'It's going to rain,' she protested. 'Look outside.'

" 'Nonsense.'

" 'No, really. Go look.'

"The sky *was* dark; he could not deny it. But he knew the patterns of weather here, he insisted. After a light shower the sun would shine. 'Come on,' he begged. 'We didn't drive all this way just to sit around the house.'

" 'I don't want to get wet. If I do, I'll catch cold and be useless.'

"For an hour he pleaded with her, keeping his disappointment under control until the very end. Then, showing some annoyance, he said, 'Well, I'll go out alone then, just to the island.' And with rod and tackle box he marched down to the shore.

"He took the canoe. From a window she watched him paddle it expertly away from the pier. When he was half way there, she ran upstairs and snatched the clothes he had worn on the drive from Connecticut.

"The car keys were in a pocket of his trousers. He had been so eager to get her out on the lake that he had forgotten to take them when he changed.

"She watched him now through binoculars. He was going to the island, he had said. She would let him get there before she fled; then, if he heard the car and raced back to stop her, it would be impossible for him to get back in time. She saw him ease the canoe against a rocky ledge and tie it to an overhanging branch. With rod and tackle box he disappeared into some trees.

"Now.

"She threw some of her things into a suitcase and ran downstairs, through the kitchen, into the yard. She was desperately afraid, even now. What if the car refused to start? What if she came to grief on that eighteen-mile stretch of wilderness road? He would find some way to overtake her, she was certain. He was resourceful. Look how patiently, how cunningly, he had tried to lure her into going out on the lake with him.

"Opening the car door, she turned for a last panicky look at the island, and saw him. He was high up on the ledge of rock, gazing down at the canoe. And the canoe was moving.

"She saw at once what had happened. A gust of wind, darkening the surface of the water as it raced across the lake, had plucked the craft from its flimsy mooring. It was already thirty feet from shore.

"She saw Alan drop his rod and tackle box and hurl himself down the promontory. Saw him leap a chasm, miss his footing, and fall. He struggled to get up and fell back again, seemingly unable to rise. Aghast at the suddenness of it, she stood by the car and watched him, while the wind swept the empty canoe toward the far end of the lake.

"He must have seen her in the yard then. Seemingly with great effort he struggled to one knee and waved to her. Probably he was calling to her as well, but with the rushing sound of the wind in the pines, and now a clatter of pelting rain, she could not hear him. Suddenly she saw that he was waving something white—it must be his shirt—in an apparently desperate effort to attract her attention.

"Myra hesitated. She was a deeply loving woman, and she adored this man. And in spite of her mother's letter she could not be *sure*. But if this were a trick—and it could be a trick—her life hung in the balance.

"He could easily have only pretended to tie the canoe, leaving it so it would drift away with the first puff of wind. Why, in the first place, had he carried both the canoe and the rowboat from the boathouse? And why, if he had gone to the island to fish, had he climbed to the top of the ledge where she would be sure to see him when he fell?

"It had to be a trick. Wrenching her gaze from the fluttering white shirt, Myra flung herself into the car and drove wildly down the road.

"She had to walk the last eleven miles of that nightmare road, for in her panic she lost control of the car and wrecked it against a stump. When she reached the village she was exhausted and hysterical, and night had fallen. Alan was close behind her, she was certain. She *must* find a place to hide.

"She hired a fellow in the village to drive her to the nearest good-sized town, where she took a room at a small hotel and phoned us. Ruth and I arrived just at daybreak, after driving all night.

"We had to know, of course, whether or not Alan was really marooned on the island, hurt by his fall. That was my job. Leaving Ruth with Myra at the hotel, I picked up the local police chief and we drove in there. We were more than an hour moving Myra's wrecked car off the logging road, so we could get past it.

"There was no one at the lodge. We rowed out to the island and there we found him, face down on the ledge, with his shirt still clutched in one hand. He was alive

then, though unconscious. He died in my car, on the way out. Internal bleeding, they told us at the hospital. Had Myra brought him ashore when he signalled her, and driven him to a hospital then, he would have survived.

"So you see," Eric Carlson concluded, frowning across his study at me, "the big question remains unanswered. Did he mean to murder her or didn't he? Obviously he didn't mean the business to end as it did, but up to the point of the accident what were his intentions?"

"Poor girl," I said. "She did so many things wrong, didn't she?"

"Reason flees in the face of terror, George."

"Yes, of course. Is it true that his first wife fell overboard from a cruise ship?"

"It's true, but there's a question in that, too. She didn't drink—dear Mrs. Cartwright was correct in that—but she *was* a chronic sleepwalker and she *did* suffer from dizzy spells. And there's another thing. When we finally got Myra's car out of that place, we found some letters in the glove compartment. They were the letters she had given him to mail, including the all-important one to her lawyer. He hadn't posted them. Of course, he might have intended to, but forgotten."

"So she will never know."

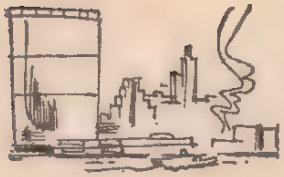
"She will never know. And she loved him. She loved him dearly. George, tell me—you're a doctor—should I get rid of the pond? If she sits there day after day staring at it, as she does, will she some day decide to—make use of it?"

"Fill it in," I advised. "The sooner the better."

COMING NEXT MONTH: A NEW STORY BY ALEX RACKOWE

BROKEN IVORY

by WALTER DALLAS



"Ivory" Alden had acquired his nickname the easy way. But murder posed a knottier problem.

I WATCHED MYSELF die. My face was all puffed and covered with grime, and it was red, too, from the blood that was trickling down over it. It had a funny look, like I was seeing the end—only it hurt so much on the way I didn't care how soon it came. I had to laugh because I knew something nobody else would ever know. The man who was dying wasn't me at all. It was old Timmy Ritter.

Timmy works in the foundry room of the Apex Press. I work there too. We are two toothless old men nobody cares anything about, and we keep out of trouble by tending vats and pouring hot lead in the matrices.

It is a good job and the pay is three dollars an hour. All we have to do is keep the lead melted. Of course we suck in lead dust when we breathe, but it doesn't kill you

on the spot. It plants lead poison in you like a seed. So finally you quit work, and go home to die comfortably in bed.

Then they get another man to take your place. Timmy and me were old, but we were tough. All the lead had done to us was make our teeth fall out.

Maybe the lead did something to our heads, too, because Timmy and me hated each other. We were crazy jealous of each other, even after the whistle blew to quit work. One time Timmy bought a new hat and felt pretty good all day. But the next noon I got one that was better, and it was rain-proof as well.

It was the same way when he got his false teeth. I didn't need a false set because I can chew my food with my gums. But I hated to see Timmy smiling at me all day with his mouth full of teeth.

So I went to the bank and drew out $127.84, which was all I had at the time, and I gave it to the same dentist and told him to make me a better set. I wore them to work three days later.

After that Timmy stopped smiling. The men in the plant had to admit I was a hard fellow to play tricks on. They liked Timmy better than me and they had always sided with him before. But after they saw my new teeth they sort of came over to my side. They even called me "Ivory." I'd showed them, all right.

So I guess I killed Timmy Ritter because I was jealous, and didn't want them to shift back.

One day two months ago Timmy came in with a sad face. He walked up to me and put his hand on my shoulder. I was surprised, because as a rule he never comes near me at all.

"I'm a sick man, Ivory," he said.

I wasn't going to let him make friends with me that easy. "I guess you are," I said. "Sick in the head."

He dug his fingers into my shoulder. "This time you shouldn't laugh," he said. "I went to the doctor's last night and he said I have very high blood pressure. He warned me not to stoop over too much. Some day the blood will all rush to my head, and something will go out. Then you will not have to swear at me."

Before I could think of anything to say he squeezed my shoulder

again. "Don't tell Mack," he said.

Mack is Mr. McArdle, our boss.

"Mack would fire me," said Timmy, "and I got to go on working."

It was then that I got the idea. I felt pretty good after I'd thought of it.

"The secret's safe with me, Timmy," I said. "I'm the best friend you have. I guess you know that."

When the whistle blew for noon I went up to Mack's office. He was looking at some papers and didn't say anything.

"I'm a sick man," I said.

He straightened abruptly and swung his chair around. "You look as strong as a bull. We can't afford sickness, with contracts to fill."

"Yes," I said. "I've got high blood pressure. The doctor says I have to be careful about lifting things. I can't stoop over too much either. I might get a shock that would kill me."

Of course he didn't fire me. Timmy didn't know that strong old men like us don't get fired, even if it's for their own good. There's nothing to keep them from working until they drop and they don't cost as much as the young fellows.

The next few weeks I acted pretty smart. I wrote a letter to my nephew in Denver. My nephew is the man who is supposed to get my twenty thousand dollar insurance when I die. I wrote that

I was coming out there soon to stay. I said he was going to have a thousand dollars if he didn't tell anyone I was coming. I knew him. For a thousand dollars he'd sell his own brother down the river.

The other thing I did was just as smart. I took a hammer and broke off a tooth from my new false set. Then I went around and made everyone think I was very mad about it. I pretended to be burned up because my false teeth looked like hell now, while Timmy's were all white and even. They all laughed, because they knew I had paid more for my set than Timmy had for his.

Finally the night came I had been waiting for. Just before the whistle blew Mack came in and said, "You two boys better work till midnight. We're behind schedule in this department. Do it for me, and I'll see you get time off later."

Time off forever and twenty thousand dollars, I was thinking. Because that was what I was going to get for working overtime.

WHEN TIMMY RITTER went out to have some beer and sandwiches I took a taxi home. I had $1,108.94 which I had taken from the bank. I got it from my dresser. Then I put my blue suit in a suitcase and hurried back to the plant, so that I would have a few moments to myself before Timmy returned. When I got there I saw I had plenty of time. No one had seen me come in. Timmy and me were going to be all alone, except for the watchman who comes around hourly.

I took a piece of rope and made a big loop over the threshold of the door leading to the washroom. The washroom is in the corner of the composing room, which is next to us, and there's a little movable flight of steps running down to it.

The next room is about three feet lower than ours, so to get out to the washroom Timmy and me had been obliged at one time to take a round-about walk through the composing room. But after we made some movable steps we could go through a hole in the wall which had started out to be a door but had never gotten finished.

Well, over this imitation door was a pulley hook. After I fixed the loop in the threshold I put the end of the cord through the pulley and laid it flat along the floor. It was now next to where I'd stood while working. Then I stepped over the loop and pulled the stairway out of the way.

Anybody who stepped down there now was going to step into the air, and if I pulled the end of the rope while he was descending the hook was going to catch him by the feet and trip him up. If I pulled it some more it was going to hang him in the air upside down.

I knew Timmy would go to the washroom sometime that night. But I wasn't quite smart enough to anticipate the way he'd do it. If I hadn't been quick as a cat he'd have spoiled the entire plan. That's just another way of saying he was trying to be smarter than me, even when he was on his way to die.

We'd been working for about an hour, not saying a word to each other. Maybe just then a piece of lead splashed on him. Anyway, he gave a jump in the air and ran for the washroom. I had to be fast to reach that rope in time, all right.

Just while he was plunging through the doorway I pulled the rope, and the instant I felt it catch his feet I ran backwards and tugged with all my strength. When I looked Timmy Ritter was hanging upside down under the door and kicking and making funny noises. He was not going to reach that washroom, ever.

I tied the rope to an iron stand which was screwed to the floor. Then I went over and stared at the upside-down man, the fellow who was going to turn into me.

He was twisting about and kicking and the rope was doing a little dance all by itself. I guess he knew it wasn't going to take very long for all the blood to rush to his head and kill him. With high blood pressure you've got to be careful. His short arms couldn't touch the sides of the door either. I'd taken that into account.

I didn't like to look at him after a few minutes. Do you know what that jealous old man did? He just made his eyes bulge out, he was trying so hard to look at me. He wouldn't say a word. It took him about twenty minutes to die.

After I cut him down I put the rope in the suitcase. Then I pulled Timmy over and laid him on the floor. That was when I was smartest of all. I took the broken set of false teeth from my mouth and I opened Timmy's jaws.

It was easier than I had planned, because he had forgotten to wear his own teeth. I didn't have to worry about getting rid of them. I put my false teeth in his mouth, and I clamped his jaws shut.

Then I dragged him over to the place where he was going to stop being Timmy Ritter and turn into Ivory Alden.

I got behind him, and lifted him by the shoulders. Then I eased him forward a little at a time into the vat. First his hair, and then his head went into the stuff that was turning him into me. Boiling lead is good for a lot of things beside soldering.

That was the way I left Timmy. Just a mean old man who was stooping over a mess of molten lead after his doctor had told him not to, and had died for his stubbornness. Both his feet were still standing on the floor, but after you looked above his pants you didn't see him any more. You only saw something pretty gruesome which had gone into the vat.

WHEN I WENT to Denver I got a New York newspaper. They had my death account in an inside page, next to the *Situations Wanted* column. I was mad at that, I can tell you. But then I thought: Who cares when a toothless old man in a foundry dies? That isn't much to read about.

About a week after I'd told my cousin Saul how to write for the insurance two men drove up to the house in a car. I heard Saul at the door, and someone saying he was the Denver representative from the insurance office, bringing a check.

When I heard that I came out into the hall myself. A man in the Denver office wouldn't know me, not with my teeth out and a two weeks' growth of beard. Anyway,

he had the check. So I came out to watch where that check went. Saul is a smart boy.

The Denver man didn't know me. But the man with him must have recognized me straight off, he snapped handcuffs on my wrists before I could move. Then he turned to the insurance man. "Imagine such a damned fool, Ed," he said.

"What *is* this?" I demanded.

The big fellow laughed and said, "You do the imagining, Ed. I can't."

I was pretty mad and scared too. "Imagine what?" I said.

"Imagine a guy dumb enough to stick his false teeth in another guy's mouth. Every man in the plant knew those broken old teeth. That's why they called him 'Ivory'. He was counting on that."

"Let me go," I said, but he pulled the iron hard so it hurt my arm, and I felt cold under my shirt where my heart was hammering.

"Inside another guy's mouth," he finished, "and all the time there was another set of teeth in the guy's windpipe, choking him to death!"

After that I knew what they were laughing at. And I knew why Timmy Ritter had jumped in the air and run for the washroom.

I also knew why he wouldn't say a word to me when he was hanging upside down. Timmy couldn't speak to me because he was choking to death from the teeth which were stuck in his windpipe.

"Why, you damned fool," the big man said to me, "you wouldn't have had to kill him if you'd waited another four or five minutes."

He jerked his thumb at the insurance fellow and they started to walk out Saul's front door, me following because of the handcuffs.

THE ONLY MAGAZINE featuring MIKE SHAYNE every month

SELF-DEFENSE

The kidnapping had the backlash malignancy of a scorpion lurking in shadows and poised to strike.

a SCOTT JORDAN story

by HAROLD Q. MASUR

GEORGE RICHARDSON was no assembly line product. He had a long straight body, compelling eyes, a precise mouth, a crisp voice, and the confident assurance of wealth. His hair was silver-grey, though he couldn't have been more than forty-five years of age. He wore his clothes like a college boy and carried himself like a Senator.

He had emerged from his private office to give me a personal convoy. His handshake was quick, firm, and nervous.

"Mr. Jordan," he said. "Glad

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you came. I suppose you're wondering why I wanted to see you."

I nodded. I was not only wondering, I was damned curious, because the outfit that usually handled his law business was a firm of attorneys five names long, with two whole floors in a Wall Street skyscraper. Compared to them, my operation was peanuts.

"Sit down, Mr. Jordan."

I sat in a wide leather chair and took in the surroundings. His office was paneled in Phillipine mahogany, with an original Gaugin on the wall and a priceless Sarouk on the floor. Anyone who thought the layout a little too fancy for a crass business enterprise would be right.

George Richardson was not in business. His ancestors had saved him the bother. He maintained this office for the sole purpose of keeping an eye on his investments.

He planted his feet in front of me and I could see that he was under pressure. "Are you free to handle something for me, Jordan?" His voice was tight and so were his jaws.

"Why me?" I asked. "Why not your own lawyers?"

He shook his head impatiently. "Because they're specialists; corporation law, probate, contracts. This is way out of their league."

I sat back. "Tell me about it."

"Here. Read this. It's self-explanatory."

He handed me a piece of paper. I unfolded it and read the message. The writer had used a pencil, printing in block letters.

Mr. Richardson, sir,

Your wife will need a black dress unless you play ball. Andy is too young to die. You can prevent it by coughing up a hundred grand. You can accelerate it by talking to the cops.

Use your head and follow instructions. Tonight, six o'clock. Stay near the telephone.

I looked up at George Richardson. He was biting the bottom corner of his lip. "Andy is the son of your second wife?"

"Yes. I adopted him legally when I married Irene."

"How old is he?"

"Four."

"Where did you find this note?" I asked.

"In the morning mail."

"May I see the envelope?"

He found it in the center drawer of his desk. The address was printed in pencil, same as the letter. It carried yesterday's postmark and had been mailed somewhere in the Grand Central area. I wondered about the postmark. It was a new switch—since Andy was, apparently, still safe.

"What am I supposed to do, Jordan?"

"You're supposed to notify the FBI."

"I know—I know . . ." He

was rubbing the creases in his forehead. "Can we afford to risk it? A boy's life is at stake."

I had no words for a moment, thinking it over. I didn't like the responsibility of making a decision. Kidnappers are mean, vindictive, and inhuman. When a life is gone, nobody can bring it back. Resurrection is only a word in the Bible, unrecognized by the medical profession. George Richardson was watching me anxiously.

"Suppose we wait for the telephone call," I said. "We can make our decision then."

He nodded quickly. "I hope you don't think I did wrong. I became a little panicky this morning and I gave into my first impulse. I went to the bank."

"For the money?"

"Yes. I withdrew it in small denominations. Mixed serial numbers."

"Where is it?"

He pointed to a bulging briefcase leaning against a corner of his desk.

"May I see it?"

"Certainly."

One glance was enough. All that currency, neatly arranged and squared away, gave me an odd sensation. Pieces of engraved paper, that's all, but what they represented was something else, a catalytic agent for most of the crimes committed on God's green footstool.

I put it down. "I'm a lawyer, Mr. Richardson, not a private detective. Why did you pick on me?"

"Because of the way you handled the divorce for my first wife." He managed a smile, half bitter, half wry. "Five hundred dollars a week alimony. That's quite a bite, counselor. My own lawyers couldn't cope with you. All right. I paid but I checked. I know your background, the kind of work you do. You have a talent for situations of this kind. I need your help."

It sounded logical enough. I had nicked him plenty for Lydia, the beautiful, restless, petulant creature he had plucked out of the Copa line and married. Why he married her, I don't know. She must have played her cards right. Probably it was the only way he could get her. The episode was brief but tempestuous, lasting six months. I got her the divorce and five hundred a week. Enough to maintain a penthouse, a convertible, and a boy friend.

The boy friend was Neil Corbin, a far more suitable mate. Lydia was out with him the night she died. Corbin had just brought her home after an extensive tour of the bistros along Fifty-second Street. He let her out at the front door and drove her car to the basement garage.

Once upstairs, Lydia apparently went out to the terrace and lost her balance. It was fourteen stories down to the rear courtyard, paved in concrete. It seems she had over-

estimated her alcoholic capacity. The medical examiner found enough bourbon in her brain to float a ferry-boat.

The cops raked Neil Corbin over the coals. He had a very shady record and no visible means of support, except Lydia. But he stuck to his story. He didn't know about the accident until after he reached the apartment.

It was water under the bridge now, almost a year old.

George Richardson broke into my thoughts. "Will you handle the money part of it for me, Jordan?"

"If you like. But I'm against paying off on the basis of threats alone. Make it that easy and he's liable to try again, on you or someone else."

"I can't help it." His jaw was out, bulldog stubborn. "I'll worry about that when it happens. Right now, Andy's safety comes first."

"Have you thought of sending him away?"

"What good would it do? His home is here. I can't keep him away forever."

"Have you spoken to your wife about this?"

He gave me a startled look. "Of course not. She'd go to pieces." He searched my face anxiously. "Do you think I should?"

"Let's see what happens. In the meantime I've got some work to do, I'll be at my office. Phone me as soon as you get your call. If it seems as if—"

He jumped as the phone rang. He was staring at it with his jaw loose. A muscle twitched under his left eye.

"It's only three o'clock," I said. "Answer it."

He unbent an elbow at the handset and got it to his ear. There was an obstruction in his throat and he cleared it out before saying, "Hello."

I could hear the diaphragm rattling in the receiver. The unintelligible words were squeak-edged and feverish, like a wire recorder running backwards at high speed. The blood drained slowly out of George Richardson's face and he spoke in a hoarse, urgent voice.

"Listen, Irene. Do as I say. Sit tight. Don't call a soul. Say nothing. I'll be right home. Understand? Sit tight."

He hung up slowly, automatically, and lifted his eyes. They were stunned.

I said sharply, "What is it?"

His fist landed hard on the desk. "They've done it. They've taken Andy."

"How?"

"Nursery school." He swallowed painfully. "They claim I phoned and said I was sending my car and chauffeur. I haven't got a chauffeur. The man picked him up an hour ago. When my wife got there, Andy was gone." He surged upright. "I must go to her."

"It's time for the FBI," I said.

"No." His voice was flat and

emphatic. "I'll pay first. We'll call the FBI after Andy comes home."

"It's your decision," I said. "Only make sure you're at the telephone by six o'clock. Which nursery school did Andy attend?"

He told me the name and gave me the address. He had a tight grip on the briefcase and was buttoning his coat when I left.

A SPINSTER NAMED Matilda Kane was the school supervisor. There was nothing wrong with her that twenty-five pounds, properly distributed, and the companionship of an enthusiastic male couldn't cure. Irene Richardson had instructed her to say nothing about the incident, so she phoned the Richardson apartment for a green light before talking. Then she looked at me, her eyes gravely troubled, waiting.

"Did you see the man who called for Andy?"

"Yes. He wore a thin black mustache, horn-rimmed glasses, and a chauffeur's cap."

"And the car he was driving?"

"A Chrysler convertible, light green, the same car Mrs. Richardson usually drove. He must have stolen it."

"Could you identify the man if you saw him again?"

"Yes, I—I think so."

"How about Andy? He must have known his father didn't have a chauffeur. Wasn't he reluctant to go along?"

"Andy is a very trusting child."

"Intelligent?"

"No more so than other four-year-olds."

I started to leave. "Thank you, Miss Kane."

"Will you let me know what happens as soon as possible?"

"Of course. But don't blame yourself for lack of omniscience. You had no way of knowing."

She shook her head, looking helpless. "I had spoken to Mr. Richardson several times on the phone. The kidnapper must have been someone who knew him well. He did a wonderful job of imitating Mr. Richardson's voice."

"The whole operation was neatly planned," I said.

But was it? Was it really planned as neatly as it looked? There seemed to be a flaw in it, but I couldn't put my finger on it. The letter I'd read kept bothering me.

I scouted the neighborhood, trying to find someone who might have seen a light green Chrysler convertible, chauffer-driven. But cars are a familiar commodity and it had gone unnoticed.

Shortly after six, I phoned George Richardson and got through to him at once. He sounded grim. "I had my call, Jordan. The kidnapper demands action. Holding Andy is too much of a problem. He wants the money tonight."

"What are your instructions?"

"He told me to walk slowly through Riverside Park at three A.M., carrying the money in a paper parcel. I'm to use the outer path between Seventy-second and Eighty-sixth Street. His accomplice has the area under surveillance now, watching for anyone suspicious. He'll keep his eye on me all the time.

"If anybody is staked out along the route, if I'm not being followed, if no cars are around, he'll make contact. If anything goes haywire, his partner will take care of Andy and blow. If the plan runs smoothly, we can expect Andy to be released within the hour somewhere in Manhattan."

Richardson paused while static crackled over the wire. "Well, Jordan, what do you think?" he asked.

"I think you'd better follow instructions to the letter."

"Of course." There was no doubt in his mind that it was the only course.

"In the meantime," I told him, "I suggest that you stay at your apartment and wait for my call."

"What are you going to do?"

"Nothing. There isn't anything we can do, except sit tight and see what happens."

"I agree. Andy's safety is paramount."

"How is your wife?"

"Frightened. She wants me to thank you for any help you may render."

"I'll do my best."

After we broke the connection, I decided to go home. The next shift might run till dawn or later and I needed rest. I wanted to feel fresh and alert. But closing my eyes failed to erase the picture from my brain. The picture of a small, four-year-old boy, violently snatched out of safe and familiar surroundings, petrified with fear, held by ruthless men.

They must have evaluated risks and consequences. The enormity of their crime was clear to them. Could they really be trusted to return Andy safe? Andy, an intelligent lad who might some day be in a position to identify them. How simple it would be to eliminate this danger! How easy to wipe

away their tracks by killing the boy!

I sat up and abandoned the sofa. I walked stiff-legged around the apartment, feeling impotent, angry with frustration. I thought of the FBI. They had the men, the facilities, the organization. I almost reached for the telephone, but swallowed the impulse, because the scales here were too delicately balanced.

We were dealing with jittery and desperate men, their nerves honed to a fine edge, and a single misstep might tip the weights. Kidnapping, a Federal offense, is punishable by death. They had nothing more to lose. Anything might blow the cork, cause them to dump the boy and haul freight.

It was shortly after midnight when I presented myself at the Richardson apartment, on Beekman Place overlooking the East River. I found Irene Richardson to be a tall slender patrician woman with anguished eyes in a drawn face lacking color, fighting to keep herself under control. The muscles in her neck were pulled taut, like the strings of a badly tuned cello. She leaned heavily on her husband's arm, not trusting her own voice. Then it came, in a broken appeal, pleading for help and assurance.

"Do you think Andy is safe?" she asked.

I caught a warning glint from the man at her side. An hysterical woman on our hands at this time would be a needless handicap.

"Yes," I said.

"He must be so terribly frightened."

"Children are very resilient, Mrs. Richardson. He'll forget all this fast enough once he's home safe."

She closed her eyes as if in prayer. "Dear Lord, I hope so."

She permitted her husband to lead her out of the room. He reappeared a moment later, his jaw set. "All right, Jordan," he rumbled. "Let's go."

I shook my head. "It's too early. If your apartment is being watched, it may make them suspicious."

He nodded and began wearing out the rug, pacing restlessly, champing at the bit, a man driven to the limits of his endurance. He paused at a mirror-covered bar, poured a stiff brandy, and tossed it off, not offering me any. Because of the strain he was under, I forgave his lapse of manners. I would have refused anyway, since alcohol and emergencies don't mix well.

A pack of cigarettes later, I glanced at my strap watch and said, "It's almost time. I don't think we should be seen leaving together. I'll go out first. Follow me in about twenty minutes."

"Where will you be?"

"At the midway mark. I'll take up a position at West End and

Seventy-ninth, the northeast corner. Don't come near me until it's all over. Got that straight?"

"Yes."

I said, "Good luck," and left him chewing the inside of his cheek.

AT THREE A.M., in that neighborhood, the streets were deserted. Overhead, the moon hung like an open porthole in the sky. Against it, the solid mass of buildings was a black silhouette, stretching endlessly. Each intersection was an island bathed in lemon-yellow light, with colored overtones from the traffic signals. An occasional car rushed past, tires humming.

A forgotten cigarette, no longer lighted, clung tenaciously to my lips. The luminous hands on my watch continued their slow arc. It was four A.M. and no sign yet of George Richardson.

I pictured him walking slowly and painfully along the outer path of Riverside Park, eyes piercing the darkness, nerves attuned to any interruption, while a boy's life hung in the balance.

A car roared through the night. Twin headlamps came hurtling up the street. Tires screamed as the brakes were suddenly clamped near where I stood and a taxi ground to a jolting halt in front of me. The door opened and George Richardson beckoned.

I climbed in and settled beside him. He was wound up tighter than a dollar watch.

"Where to, Mac?" the driver said.

"Head downtown." Richardson's fingers curled around my arm. His eyes were burning and he spoke in a hoarse, barely controlled whisper. "The man came. He picked me up near Eighty-first Street."

"Was he alone?"

"I think so, yes. He pulled alongside in a car and called my name. I went over and he said, 'Give me the package.' I handed it to him and he stepped on the gas." The fingers tightened on my sleeve, nails digging in. "I got his license number, Jordan. Six Y forty-six-dash-zero-seven. Can you find out who he is?"

"Yes, when the license bureau opens, providing the car isn't stolen."

"We must get Andy back first."

"That goes without saying."

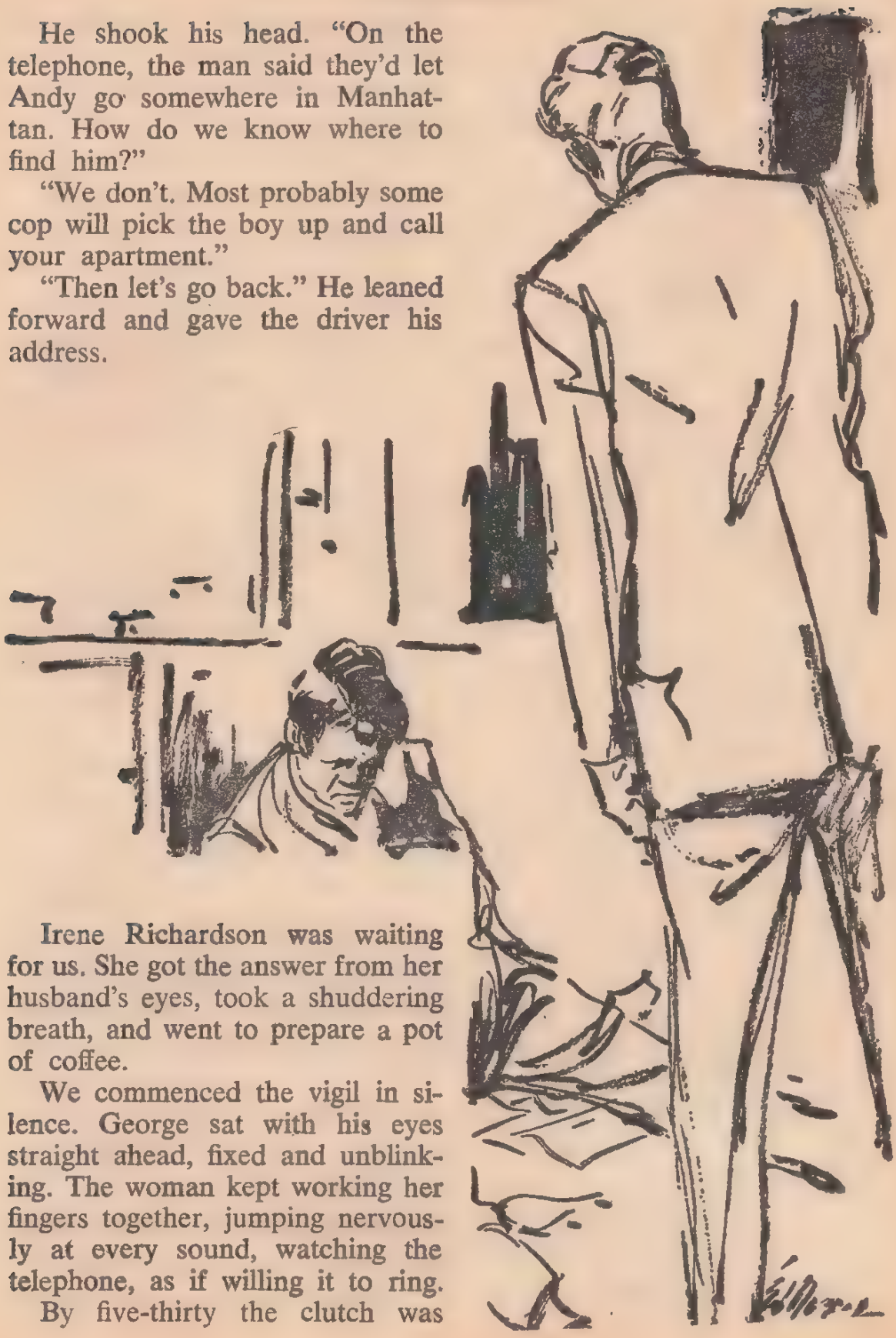
"What do we do now?"

"We wait and see if they keep their promise."

He shook his head. "On the telephone, the man said they'd let Andy go somewhere in Manhattan. How do we know where to find him?"

"We don't. Most probably some cop will pick the boy up and call your apartment."

"Then let's go back." He leaned forward and gave the driver his address.



Irene Richardson was waiting for us. She got the answer from her husband's eyes, took a shuddering breath, and went to prepare a pot of coffee.

We commenced the vigil in silence. George sat with his eyes straight ahead, fixed and unblinking. The woman kept working her fingers together, jumping nervously at every sound, watching the telephone, as if willing it to ring.

By five-thirty the clutch was

slipping. Suddenly she broke training and was on her feet, chin out of control. "I—I can't stand it. Why don't they call? Where is he? Oh, Andy—Andy—"

Her husband got her down on the sofa again, stroking her hands.

I said, "These things take time, Mrs. Richardson."

But the delay bothered me. I didn't like it. There was no reason for it, unless the kidnappers had decided on a double-cross. The same thought must have entered Richardson's mind, for he threw me an angry look, bleak and cold.

Another hour and dawn crept through the window in a soiled gray smudge. Traffic noises began rumbling in the street below. The woman had her face in her hands now, sobbing quietly, shoulders convulsed.

At nine-thirty I went to the telephone and put a call through to a man I knew in the license bureau. I gave him the number and waited while he checked. He got the information and I thanked him.

George Richardson was beside me, gripping my sleeve. "Well?"

"A man named Steve Ballou owns the car. He lives on the west side, near Tenth Avenue. I don't know whether the car was stolen or not."

"Can you find out?"

"Yes." I dialed Homicide West and got through to Detective-Lieutenant John Nola.

"Well, counselor," he said, genuinely pleased. "A pleasure. Haven't heard from you in several months. What cooks on the legal front?"

"The usual," I said. "Will you do me a favor, John?"

"What?"

"I'd like to know if a certain car was stolen."

"That's not my department, but I'll find out for you. Give me the registration number."

It didn't take long and a moment later his voice was back in my ear. "Got it, counselor. No larceny reported."

"One thing more, Lieutenant. Will you have someone check the files on a character named Steve Ballou? I'd like to know if he has a record."

"Can do," Nola said. "Will call you back."

George Richardson literally bit his fingernails in the interim. When the phone rang, he grasped the handset and said hoarsely, "Yes?" His face fell and he handed me the instrument.

It was Nola. "Here it is, Scott. Steve Ballou, four times arrested, one conviction, served a term at Sing Sing, released three years ago."

"Known associates?" I asked.

"Seems to be a lone operator. His cellmate up the river was Neil Corbin. They roomed together for a brief time after Corbin was paroled. And that's about it."

"Thank you, John."

"Good luck, counselor." He broke the connection.

George Richardson said, "Did he—what is it, man? For heaven's sake, what's wrong?"

"A lead," I said. "Ballou and Neil Corbin are friends."

"Corbin?" His gaping eyes were bright with conjecture.

"Your first wife's boy friend. The man who brought her home the night she was killed."

"He took Andy?"

"One of them did."

A nerve bulged and twiched in his temple. He swung decisively on his heel and stalked from the room. He came back jamming a loaded clip into the heel of an automatic He handled it well, with a neat economy of motion.

"Took this from a dead German colonel," he said. "Know how to use it, too."

"Oh, no," his wife wailed, "please, George . . ."

He ignored her. "All right, Jordan, let's roll."

"We ought to have some help on this."

"No time for explanations. Let's go."

I followed him down and we took a cab to Ballou's address. It was an ancient brownstone in a seedy neighborhood Ballou's apartment was on the third floor.

"All right," George said, "here's the program." His voice was incisive, no longer irresolute, and I sensed a subtle change in our relationship. He was leading now, the bloodhound on a scent.

"You stand back and to one side, Jordan. I'll ring the bell. If he turns the latch, hit the door hard. We'll take these goons by surprise."

I nodded and we went up. There was a tiny peephole in Ballou's door. I had a feeling the place was deserted, but I braced myself nevertheless. Richardson stood close and rang the bell There was a long pause. No sound from within, no sound at all.

His finger depressed the button again. Then I heard the latch slide back. The door started to open and I hit it hard. I caught it squarely with my shoulder, al-

most tearing the hinges off. It struck the man behind it, slamming him back. He caught his balance with a frantic shuffle, eyes staring wildly in his head and I recognized him then, Neil Corbin. His angular face was white and desperate. Panic flooded his eyes.

I saw his hand flash under his lapel and heard Richardson's shout, "Duck, Jordan, duck!"

But I wasn't fast enough and the gun jumped into Corbin's hand. It was a Smith & Wesson, caliber .38, and the gaping barrel looked like an open doorway to hell. I threw myself flat as it thundered and my ears were ringing instantly from the concussion.

I heard a nasty slap that wrung a cry of pain from Richardson's throat, and Neil Corbin ducked out of the foyer into the living room.

I grabbed the automatic and snaked along the floor to the archway. Neil Corbin had taken to his heels and was racing toward the kitchen. I went after him and when I got there his head was out of the window and he was pulling his leg through to the fire escape.

"Corbin!" I yelled. "Hold it!"

He swiveled and pumped out two blind shots. The slugs bit viciously into the plaster behind me. I saw the searing venom in his eyes as he sighted more carefully and heard Richardson shout behind me.

I turned to see him point the gun at Corbin. The shot caught Corbin in the chest and he tumbled over backward, legs flying awkwardly.

I knew he was finished and I didn't bother with him. I went back through the living room and found another door and opened it A small boy was on the bed, trussed hand and foot, a strip of adhesive tape covering his mouth. From the numb, inanimate look in his eyes I knew that he'd been drugged. I untied him and gently removed the tape from his lips.

George Richardson staggered into the room behind me. His gun was in his hand. "Andy!" he said. "Andy, boy!"

WE CAUGHT HELL, both of us, from the Police Department and from the FBI. Lieutenant Nola, especially, went after my hide. It took all morning and most of the afternoon to get the story told and everything cleaned up. George Richardson's wound was not serious and he was able to navigate under his own power.

When he finally had me alone, the Lieutenant said dourly, "We bust cops from the force for going it alone. You know better than that, Scott. And another thing, you and Richardson left Neil Corbin out on that fire escape wedged between a couple of rungs. Innocent pedestrians can get hurt that way. Don't ever do it again."

"How about Steve Ballou?" I said. "Any chance of nailing him?"

"Ballou is out of it. He had permission from his parole officer to leave the state. He works for a plumbing outfit and he's in Ohio, driving around to see their midwest accounts. Corbin worked this out alone. He must have gotten a lot of information from Lydia Richardson before she was killed."

"That ties it up then."

"Just about, except for two items; a Sullivan Law violation against Mr. Richardson for possession of that Mauser automatic he used—although I doubt if the D.A. will press the charge."

"And the second item?"

"The money. One hundred grand. Corbin hid it somewhere. We took the place apart and couldn't find it."

"That's something to look for. Maybe Richardson can still use my services."

"Yeah." Nola shuffled some papers on his desk. "Sorry, lad. Reports to make out. Keep your nose clean."

My muscles ached with exhaustion. I was saturated with weariness, but I walked anyway, because the past twenty-four hours kept whirling through my brain in brief kaleidoscopic flashes.

The ransom money kept hounding me. And then, quite suddenly, I had a pretty good idea where it was, and I stopped off at a drug store and patronized the phone booth, and put a call through to George Richardson's apartment. His wife answered, sounding exultant, and she thanked me effusively. Her husband was at his office, working late.

I quit the store and flagged a cab.

A light was burning behind the frosted glass door of Richardson's office. He glanced up as I entered and flashed me a gleaming white smile, extending his left hand because his right arm was in a sling. This time he remembered his manners and offered me a drink.

I took it, since I did not expect to get any fee for handling the case.

"You did a fine job of work, Jordan. Fine. I'm delighted."

"How's Andy?"

"Coming along fine. He was under drugs most of the time and hardly remembers a thing."

Richardson opened a desk drawer and pulled out a check book. He flipped it open and uncapped a fountain pen. "I'd like to show my appreciation, Jordan, by doubling your usual fee."

"The case isn't closed yet I'd like to find the ransom money first."

"But where can you look?"

"Right here," I said. "Somewhere in this office."

The smile slid off his face and he sat up sharply, staring at me

with a queer puckered look in his eyes. "I—what do you mean?"

"I mean that you never gave it to Corbin, that he never appeared at the park, that the package you carried last night was a phoney stuffed with worthless paper which you tossed into the bushes somewhere."

"You must be crazy!" Richardson cried.

"Yeah. Like a fox. That whole kidnapping was a sham, conceived and staged by you, a dodge, dust in the eyes, to conceal your true motive."

"Which was?"

"To murder Neil Corbin. To kill him in front of a witness, apparently in self-defense."

He bent forward stiffly, the muscles in his face rigid. "That's ridiculous."

"Is it? Then let me spell it out Neil Corbin was blackmailing you. He probably saw you leaving your first wife's apartment the night she was killed and he guessed that she hadn't fallen, that you must have pushed her. He may even have found some evidence to prove it, something you struck her over the head with, bearing your fingerprints, which he hid. He never told the cops, oh, no, not Corbin, there'd be no profit in that. But he told you. He told you and made it pay off."

A strained laugh, short and mirthless. "I don't understand. Why would I kill Lydia?"

"Because of five hundred dollars a week alimony. Twenty-six grand a year. Add it up over a ten year period. Over a quarter of a million. She had no intention of marrying Corbin and relinquishing her income. There was no way of getting off the nut. You'd have to pay and pay and pay. So you decided to have it out with Lydia and waited at her apartment that night. Maybe you tried to make a cash settlement and she laughed in your face. Maybe you lost your head and struck her with a bookend and then had to cover up by dropping her over the ledge.

"You gained nothing, however, because Corbin saw you as he left the garage, and you started paying again. Then you had a bright idea. You dreamed up a scheme. You offered Corbin a lump sum, and probably told him you'd have to get the money from your wife, and that the only way to work it would be through her son Andy. You said you would lend him your car and call the school. You promised to get the money and deliver it to him and bring Andy back. You told him no one else would be involved, the cops would not be notified. And he believed you because you were personally involved.

"You wrote the ransom note yourself, mailed it yourself, and called me in. You arranged for us to find Corbin with the boy and you shot him when we broke into

the apartment. There was a peephole in the door and he would have opened it for no one but you. He was expecting you to bring him the money. And that's why we were let in."

Beads of moisture had formed along Richardson's upper lip. "Guesswork," he said hoarsely.

"All guesswork; you said so yourself."

"Up to that point, yes," I said. "But the rest of it we can prove."

The inner edges of his eyebrows drew together questioningly. "How?"

"You gave me the license number of Ballou's car. But that car is somewhere in Ohio with its owner and couldn't possibly be in New York. The woman at Andy's school thought she recognized your voice. She certainly did, because it actually was your voice. And no professional kidnapper would have written a letter first and then taken the boy. But it made no difference to you because you were in control of the situation at all times. You had no intention of calling the FBI or letting anyone else interfere."

"Look, Jordan. If I wanted to kill Neil Corbin, why didn't I just do it when nobody was around?"

"Because you didn't want to start a homicide investigation. You were afraid the police would find his bank deposits and start looking for their source. They might tie him up to you through Lydia. His deposits would coincide with your withdrawals. No, sir, it was better this way. Involve him in a kidnapping and shoot him in cold blood. You'd be a hero."

Richardson's tongue coiled slowly over his lips. "It's a flimsy case. They can't convict me."

"Not so flimsy," I said. "There's

plenty of corroboration, especially when they find the ransom money hidden right here in your office."

He swallowed hugely and his eyes kindled with desperate hope. He was grasping at straws. "Corbin is dead. Nobody can place me near Lydia's apartment the night she fell." But he didn't believe it himself. I waited, watching him carefully.

I don't know what he was trying to prove, but suddenly he snatched a letter opener off his desk, and lunged at me. I had to twist him plenty before he subsided.

The way he looked now, I wasn't sure he'd ever live long enough for the State of New York to strap him down and deliver the proper voltage.

I figured he was due for a heart attack any minute, maybe before the boys arrived.

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RAINY NIGHT

To live to have grandchildren . . . a man may have to think fast.

by

BAYNE HOBART

JOHN BLAKE, gray-haired, quiet and affable, stood behind the hotel desk. His tired blue eyes stared through shell-rimmed glasses at the rain runing down the glass panels of the revolving door at the far end of the lobby. Blake heartily

disliked rainy nights like this in New York. They were always dismal, dull and monotonous. When you have been a hotel night clerk for thirty years everything seems routine.

Languidly Blake watched a young woman coming in through the revolving door, her coat and hat wet from the rain that glistened on the traveling bag she carried. She was pretty, well-dressed, and did not appear to be in the least nervous. You could size up people quickly when you'd been a hotel clerk for thirty years.

"Front!" Blake called, his voice carrying to the bellboys bench, but not loud enough to disturb the few guests sitting around the lobby.

A bellboy leaped up from the bench and hurried to the girl as she came across the lobby. Blake liked the way she held her head up, the way she walked. She reminded him of his daughter, Martha.

"I'd like a room, please." The young woman had reached the desk now, and the bellboy was right behand her, carrying her bag. Her brown eyes were big and shining bright.

"What are your rates?"

"Eight dollars a day for a single room, twelve dollars for a double," Blake said. "Would you prefer a bath or shower, Miss?"

"It really doesn't matter. I'll take a single room, please."

"Very good, Miss." Blake placed a register card in front of her. "Just sign this and the boy will take you to your room."

The young woman took off her gloves, picked up the desk pen and wrote swiftly, while Blake got a key out of the rack. When she'd finished he swung the register card around and read: *Miss Nancy Martin, Cumberland, Maryland,* He motioned the bellboy forward and handed him the room key.

"Show Miss Martin four-twenty." Blake said.

"Yes, sir," said the bellboy. "This way, please, Miss Martin."

He led the young woman across the lobby to the elevators, and followed her into the car with her bag. The door slid shut.

Blake was no longer watching where the bellboy and the girl had gone. He was gazing at a tall man who pushed through the revolving doors as if he had a grudge against them, and headed for the hotel desk. He wore a belted raincoat, unpressed trousers and scuffed brown shoes. His dark hair was too long and he needed a shave. Blake didn't like the look in the man's eyes as he reached the desk and stood glaring at the night clerk.

"I'm Fred Norton," the tall man said, and Blake had a feeling he wasn't quite used to the name. "Is my wife registered here?"

Blake frowned. "I don't believe so. I can't recall the name." He added quickly, "Just a moment and I'll check and make sure."

"She's got to be here," The man

insisted. I saw her get out of a taxi and come into this hotel a few minutes ago."

"Sorry," said Blake, checking the names on the guest cards. "We have no Mrs. Fred Norton registered here now."

"You're lying, trying to keep me away from her—" Norton started shouting, then calmed down when he saw the way Blake just stood coldly gazing at him. "Sorry—I didn't mean to get so excited." A thought stuck him. "Am I dumb! She said she was leaving me for good. Of course she wouldn't use her married name."

"That's quite possible." Blake had had plenty of experience with husbands seeking missing wives. But he had never disliked one as much as he did this tall man.

Norton stared at the register card still lying on the desk. "That's her!" he exclaimed. "Nancy Martin, Cumberland, Maryland."

"I see. Then your wife is originally from Cumberland?"

"Yeah, that's where we first met," Norton said.

"Delightful little city. I've been there. I like the way most of the business section of the town is centered around Lee Street."

"Oh, sure, so do I. But never mind the guided tour, Pop. I gotta see my wife. What's her room number?"

"Nine-sixteen." Blake made a slight beckoning gesture to someone behind the tall man. "Wouldn't it be best to phone Miss Martin's room and ask if she'll see you?"

The tall man shook his head. She might refuse. You know how women are, Pop. Everything will be swell if I go up and talk to her."

"Just as you wish." Blake reached into the rack and drew out a key as a big, heavyset man came to the desk. "Nasty evening, Mr. Clark."

"Sure is, Mr. Blake." Clark dropped the key into his pocket after giving the tag a quick glance. "Glad I stayed in the bar and didn't go out."

"Nine- sixteen," muttered Norton, heading for the elevators. I'll show her she can't get away from me."

Clark shot a quick glance at Blake. The night clerk nodded, and the heavyset man followed Norton, and they both crowded into the elevator just as it was going up.

Blake picked up an evening paper he had been reading before going on duty. A headline caught his glance: DYING ASSAULT VICTIM CLAIMS HER ATTACKER WAS TALL AND DARK. Blake sighed and reached for the desk phone. He had the hotel switchboard operator connect him with Miss Nancy Martin in room 420. He explained that he was Mr. Blake, the room clerk and asked her to please come down, and see him at the desk. When she said she would be right down Blake hung up.

While waiting Blake put in a call to the nearest police precinct sta-

tion and asked that a prowl call be sent to the hotel. As he put away her register card Nancy Martin appeared at the desk looking quite fresh and young and pretty. Blake smiled at her.

"Anything wrong, Mr. Blake?" she asked.

"No," Blake said. "But I'd like to ask one or two personal questions. First are you married to a man named Fred Norton?"

"Of course not. I've never been married to anyone, but I am engaged to Howard March, who lives here in town. I arrived a day early. Howard's been delayed in Boston on business. He told me to stay at this hotel until he can take me to meet his family tomorrow."

"Thank you, Miss Martin," Blake said. "There was a man here who insisted he was your husband. I didn't believe him, but I had to be sure. That's why I asked you to come down to the desk."

"Sweet of you, Mr. Blake. I—" she broke off as she glanced toward the elevators and Norton and Clark stepped out of a car.

"That tall man! He's been following me ever since I got off the train at Penn Station. Did he claim he was my husband? I never saw him before in my life. Do—do I have to talk to him, Mr. Blake? He frightens me."

"He won't bother you anymore, Miss Martin," Blake said gently. "Go on back to your room."

He saw that the tall man looked like he had been in a fight and he was handcuffed to Clark's right wrist. Norton had obviously learned the hard way that the big house detective for the hotel was a tough man to fool around with in a fight.

Two police officers entered the hotel lobby. Clark unfastened the cuff attached to his wrist and turned the prisoner over to the prowl car men who took Norton away. Nancy Martin had returned in the elevator to her room.

"Nice work, John," the house detective said as he came to the desk. "How'd you spot him so fast?"

"He gave me the missing wife bit, but he messed it up good," Blake said." He didn't even know the girl's name until he spotted it on a register card I'd carelessly left on the counter. Then he said they had first met in Cumberland, Maryland. When I said that Lee Street was the main business section of the town, though it is actually in Baltimore, he agreed. So when he wanted to go up to see his wife I gave him nine-sixteen as her room number, which was a vacant room Then I signaled you, gave you the key to nine-fourteen and let you take it from there. What happened upstairs, Bill?"

"We both get off on nine," Clark said. "I unlocked nine-fourteen stepped in and closed the door. Then I opened it just a little and waited. This tall guy, what name did he give you?"

"Fred Norton."

"All right. Norton knocks on the door of nine-sixteen and says, 'Telegram for you, Miss Martin.' When he tries it a couple of more times and doesn't get any answer he blows his top. Starts yelling and pounding on the door. I step out to quiet him down and he pulls a knife on me. I sock him on the jaw and knock him groggy. Me being a southpaw always fools 'em. Could be we got that killer who made the front pages today. Description fits him—tall and dark."

"I hope so," said Blake. "I didn't like the way he kept calling me 'Pop'."

"What's so bad about Pop?" Clark demanded. "Your daughter Martha is getting married tomorrow. A few more years and you may have a bunch of kids calling you Grandpop."

"True." John Blake gazed at the rain still running down the panels of the revolving door. He was glad Nancy Martin didn't know how close she had come to being assaulted and perhaps murdered. "Grandpop—that I'd like!"

Next Month—A New Exciting Spy Novelet

THE EXECUTIONER

By MAX VAN DERVEER

He was a mysterious, half-legendary figure . . . active in the spy networks of Europe before the end of World War II. And now he had a dangerous new task to perform.

A LESSON

It was an ancient firm with high ethical standards. But when a junior partner's thoughts turn to murder . . .

WELL LEARNED

by ROBERT ARTHUR

JOSEPH CRESSWELL, of Adams, Black and Cresswell, smiled at old Mrs. Fontaine, who had been a client of the firm for just under fifty years. She smiled back tremulously, her parchment features alight with trust. Mr. Cresswell, so energetic, so composed, so radiating competence, was most reassuring. In the complex and bewildering modern world, it was nice to have someone to turn to, someone you could trust.

"So you see, Mrs. Fontaine," Joe Cresswell said, "by making this shift into tax exempt bonds, your income will remain almost the same but your income tax will be reduced by almost five thousand dollars."

"Whatever you say, Mr. Cresswell," she murmured. "I'm completely in your hands. It does seem like a wise move, the way you explain it."

She rose, and Joe Cresswell gallantly stood up. He gave the impression that if Adams, Black and Cresswell had not been quite so old, so conservative, he would have kissed her hand.

The door to his private office opened and Miss Langley stepped in. Nell Langley gave an impression of trim efficiency. She was just a shade too attractive, really, to be a legal secretary in such an ancient firm, but her ability was unquestioned.

"Mr. Adams wonders if you could step into his office, Mr. Cresswell." Her voice was uninflected. But there was a suggestion of subtle warning in it that no one less discerning than Joseph Cresswell would have noticed.

"Thank you, Miss Langley," he said. "I'll be there in just a moment." He smiled again at Mrs. Fontaine. "Please, come in again soon, Mrs. Fontaine. It brightens a day in these dusty offices to have you visit us."

Mrs. Fontaine left, her heart fluttering, mentally deciding to buy a new hat. Nell Langley gave Joe Cresswell a look that said more than her words.

"Mr Adams and Mr. Black are in conference," she said swiftly. "I

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believe it concerns the Fleming Trust. I took the folder in to Mr. Adams a little while ago."

"The Fleming Trust?" Joe Cresswell hesitated an instant in reaching for a cigartete. Then he put the cigarette box away. "Right. And thanks. I'll go right in."

He strode off toward A. J. Adams' private office, whistling softly. Watching him go, Nell Langley bit her lips very lightly. Then she walked out, once again the impersonal efficient legal secretary.

Adams, Black and Cresswell were certainly one of the oldest and most conservative—many of their competitors said stodgy and hidebound—legal firms in the city. The offices, which the firm had occupied for fifty years, were dim with dark, panelled oak. The windows reached from floor to ceiling, and the dust of half a century perfumed the air faintly as it rested on unopened, calfskin-bound volumes of outmoded legal decisions.

But only A. J. Adams, the senior partner, was as elderly as the firm's traditions. Of recent years the firm had been sinking rapidly into oblivion. The big accounts no longer came to it, as there were younger, more aggressive legal firms to go to.

So A.J. had taken into the firm two bright young men, Peter Black and Joe Cresswell. Black was an Ivy League graduate who knew how to dress and was competent, if not exceptional. Joe Cresswell, from some obscure Midwest law school, was the brains that would, A.J. hoped, lift the firm back once more to the top. The big, blond young man certainly had the drive—and the self-assurance—to do it. His unorthodox approach worried A.J. sometimes; but the boy would season, he would season.

In the largest of the firm's offices, A. J. Adams, big, white-maned, sat ponderously behind his desk. Pete Black sat to one side, smoking and at ease—but not really. Joe Cresswell ignored Pete's tension and smiled at A.J.

"Good morning, A.J.," he said. "Hope I haven't kept you. Mrs. Fontaine just left."

"Mrs. Fontaine thinks a lot of you, Joe," A.J. rumbled. "And I wanted to compliment you on the way you handled that Monmouth tax matter. Though," he added, a shade less happily, "the Monmouth Corporation isn't exactly the kind of client we welcome. Some of their dealings—"

"I'm keeping an eye on them, A.J.," Cresswell broke in reassuringly, as he pulled up a chair. "I agree with you that they are showing some undesirable ethical standards in the conduct of their business. We may have to resign from the position of legal council. But you wanted to see me?"

"Oh, yes." A.J. leaned forward. "It's about the estate of Mary

Jane Fleming. I should say, the estate of Waldo Fleming, held in trust for Mary Jane, his only child."

Joe Cresswell frowned. Pete Black cut in swiftly. "You remember, Joe, Waldo Fleming died about five years ago when his sailboat tipped over. I've been acting as administrator of the estate ever since."

"Sure, I remember," Cresswell said. "We're trustees until the girl reaches twenty-one. That'll be about three years from now, right?"

"Until she reaches the age of twenty-one, Joe—or until she marrise," A.J. amended.

"Don't tell me that skinny little girl with pigtails is going to get herself married!" Joe Cresswell exclaimed, in amused astonishment.

"Strange as it seems, Joe, she is," Pete Black answered. He was not amused. "She's grown out of the pigtail stage now. I understand she's quite attractive."

As the conversation proceded, there was a clear but unspoken understanding between the two younger men. A.J. was concerned because some of the securities in the Fleming trust seemed to be missing. And they had to have the estate ready to turn over to Mary Jane and her new husband in just two weeks. Joe Cresswell reassured him convincingly, and he and Pete Black retired to Cresswell's office for a private conference.

Pete, the conventional Ivy Leaguer, was badly worried. Joe, the bright, aggressive young man, was concerned but not worried. They owed the estate of Waldo Fleming fifty thousand dollars, and unfortunately had no way of replacing the money within the two week time limit.

"It was your idea," Pete said bitterly. "You said that in three years we could multiply that money by ten! So I let you talk me into dipping into the estate! Now what are we going to do—tell A.J. and throw ourselves on his mercy?"

"Certainly not," Cresswell said. He was unruffled. "A.J. would mumble about 'a shocking betrayal of trust' and throw us to the wolves."

"Okay then, how are we going to get out of this jam?" Pete Black asked heatedly. "If it weren't for you and your schemes—"

"Forget the hysterics!" Cresswell told him abruptly. "That money will grow to a quarter million in three years. I happen to know some of Monmouth's plans. It's just a bad break, the Fleming girl getting married. A chance we had to take.

"Look, Petey boy, in this world you have to take chances to get ahead. You have to cut corners. We live in a jungle culture—it's eat or be eaten. You want to get

to the top? Sure you do—and so do I. We're not going to do it by sitting around, being ethical, and playing safe all our lives. Not with today's tax structure. We *have* to take a few chances."

"Joe Cresswell, boy orator," said Black. "Now we've taken the chance, and we've been caught with our chance down. What next?"

"Let's assess the situation. The wedding might not come off."

"Why not?" Black asked.

"For one thing, Mary Jane might die."

"Healthy eighteen-year-olds don't take sick and die that conveniently."

"I agree that it's unlikely. I'm just going through the possibilities."

"Let's have a possibility that's more possible, then."

"Then how about this one. A.J. might die. If he did, we'd certainly be given an extension of time in which to turn over the Fleming estate. Three months anyway."

"Where would we get fifty thousand, even in three months?"

"Are you forgetting we carry partnership insurance? If any one of us dies, the surviving partners collect fifty thousand dollars."

Pete Black stared at him. "You're serious about this."

"Life is a serious business, Petey boy. So is death. Certainly I'm serious."

"You're seriously suggesting A.J. might—die?"

"I'm suggesting that he *will* die."

Black looked appalled. "No! I won't have any part of it! We're in too deep already."

"Look, Petey boy! It's eat or be eaten. We're about to be eaten, unless we do something. Sure there's a risk. But believe me, the alternative is a certainty. Do you want to go to jail, your career—your life—ruined? Or do you want to take a reasonable chance, a calculated risk, and be able to see yourself on top of the heap instead?"

"Well—"

"That's better." Joe Cresswell grinned expansively. "Stick with me, Pete. You'll learn. I'm going to the top and I'll take you with me. We have to stick together."

That evening, Joe Creswell called at a small apartment in a pleasant but inconspicuous neigh-

borhood. A Nell Langley who looked more attractive and less crisply efficient admitted him.

"Joe, what is it?" she asked, after he had kissed her. "Trouble?"

"Life," Joe Cresswell said, "is simply a process of meeting troubles and overcoming them. Trouble is the norm, the thing to be expected."

"But there *is* trouble?" she persisted. "Over the Fleming estate?"

"Yes, there's trouble," he conceded. "But it'll straighten out. Oh, tomorrow, tell A.J. that he's looking pale, that he ought to get away from the city for a little fun, will you?"

"Tell A.J. that he's looking pale?" The woman frowned. "What are you planning, Joe?"

"Martini with vodka?" he asked, and finding the ingredients, started to mix a drink.

"Joe?" she asked sharply. "Is it —dangerous?"

"No more dangerous than crossing the street," he chuckled. "Everything is dangerous, Nell. Ten years from now, how'd you like to be the wife of Congressman Joseph Cresswell?"

"You're going to do—anything you have to, aren't you?"

Cresswell nodded.

"Anything," he said cheerfully. "There's no other recipe for success, believe me." He handed her a glass and raised his. "Here's to crime. And the only crime is getting caught."

THE BIG CAR raced smoothly northward along the cliff road. It held the three men—Adams, Black and Cresswell. Joe Cresswell was driving, with A.J. beside him. Pete Black sat uneasily in the back.

A.J. the Elder Statesman of the firm, was vaguely uneasy. He didn't feel he should have let Black and Cresswell persuade him to take off a weekend for fishing at Cresswell's lodge. But since they assured him that they had all of the papers pertinent to the Fleming estate with them, and that the report could be completed over the weekend, he supposed it was all right. Joe Cresswell assured him that it was.

"How about some coffee, A.J.?" he asked. "We have a thermos of it, black and strong, the way you like it. Pour A.J. some, will you, Pete?"

Pete poured a cup of coffee from a Thermos and passed it up front. A.J. drank it. Presently, as old men will, he dozed off. Pete Black leaned forward tensely.

"Joe!" he said. "Isn't it about time you tell me what you're up to?"

"No, Petey boy, it isn't," Joe told him. "I'm taking the responsibility. All you have to do is act surprised—and shocked, of course." He chuckled. "That shouldn't be too hard."

"Suppose A.J. wakes up?" Black asked.

"He won't. I put something in the coffee. Don't drink it."

Hastily Pete Black poured the coffee back into the thermos. His face registered anxiety and desperation. Joe Cresswell grinned.

Half an hour later, the road curved close to the clifftops. Below was a hundred foot drop. Beyond that, the ocean and the beach. Joe Cresswell pulled the car to a stop off the road on a slight slope. There was no guard rail—just a light wooden barrier to keep sightseers from falling over the sheer drop to the rocks below. On the other side of the road was a small, dilapidated diner with a sign that said, AL'S LOOKOUT DINER.

A.J. was still asleep. Joe Cresswell killed the motor, set the brake, and stretched. "All out, end of the line, Pete," he said. "Hand me that Scotch freezer will you?"

Pete Black handed him the wide-mouthed thermos jug and Joe slipped out. Pete saw him extract a sizeable chunk of dry ice from the jug, and wedge it beneath the front wheel of the car. He was hidden from sight of the diner by the car itself.

Next Joe casually reached in and loosened the handbrake.

"Joe!" Pete's voice was sharp. "What the devil—"

"Let's just go in and have a couple of hamburgers, Pete," Joe Cresswell said. "Leave the talking to me. You look nervous. Never look nervous, pal. When you act nervous, the world suspects you of everything. Act confident, sure of yourself, and the world rushes up to hand you everything you want. And remember—when dry ice evaporates, it leaves no trace."

They went into the diner. To Pete Black's horror, a state trooper was there, eating and chatting with the grizzled proprietor. Joe calmly ordered 'burgers and coffee and entered into the conversation. From time to time Pete could not refrain from glancing at the car. He knew the dry ice was evaporating, swiftly, foaming off in faint foglike wisps.

Then he saw the car start to move, slowly, slowly, down the slope. He choked back an exclamation. The car moved faster. Then the owner of the diner saw it. He raised the alarm. They all turned and raced out. But the car was running too fast now. It crashed through the wooden barrier and was gone.

They looked after it, stunned.

Pete Black had no trouble acting upset.

MALCOLM ANDREWS, adjuster for the insurance company, was vaguely unhappy about the whole affair, but couldn't put his finger on anything that could explain why he felt that way. In his final interview with Cresswell and Black, he went over the facts again. Both the young men had appeared to be sincerely distressed.

Cresswell said that A.J. had been like an uncle to him—he'd rather have been the one to die, himself. His theory was that A.J. had waked from his sleep, and in reaching for the door handle had pulled himself across the seat by the handle of the emergency brake, thus dislodging it and letting the big, old, foreign limousine start to move. Andrews was forced to agree. He left the company's check and went out.

Black and Cresswell held a conference after he was gone.

"You see, Pete boy," Joe said expansively. "It went off like clockwork. All of the Fleming records were lost when the car burned. We can take as long as we need to make an accounting, and we have the money to replace those bonds we—ah—borrowed."

But the strain had left Pete Black worn and haggard. When Joe said they were going places now, without the deadweight of A.J. to hold them back, he shook his head.

"I've had it, Joe," he said. "Maybe I'm not meant to be a success. Maybe I'm not tough enough. But I can't operate the way you do. I haven't slept in a week. I want to dissolve the firm."

"Dissolve the firm?" For the first time Joe Cresswell acted upset. "Wait a minute, Pete. We can't do that."

"We can and I want to," Pete told him stubbornly. "I'm not cut out to be a succes on your terms. I know that now."

"There's one little reason we can't dissolve the firm, Pete boy," Joe Cresswell said softly. "That's because if we did so we'd have to make a general accounting on all the estates we're acting as trustees for. And—ah—I hate to say it, but several of them are short. It will take time to make up the losses."

"You mean you—" Pete Black stared at him. "What estates are *short*?"

"I'll have all the figures for you in a week. I'm working on a way to make up the shortage now. Look, Joe, you're in bad shape. Take a week off. Get some sunshine, some swimming. In a week we'll go over this whole thing again. Maybe you'll feel different then."

That evening, Joe Cresswell dropped in at Nell Langley's apartment again. Nell wore a becoming blue silk dress that was shimmery and clinging, and her greeting was clinging too—but something was missing. Joe released her and looked at her.

"What is it, Nell?" he asked. "Your heart wasn't in that."

Nell selected a gold-tipped cigarette and waited for Joe to snap a lighter into flame for her. Then she said, "It's A.J., Joe. Did he really have to—die?"

"I should have guessed." Cresswell found the buffet, poured Scotch over a cube of ice, and lift-

ed it to his lips. "Yes, baby, he did have to die. That's the whole keystone of the scheme."

"But he was such a harmless old fuddy-duddy," Nell argued. "I know he was stuffy, but there was something sweet about his old-fashioned ideas about women and things."

"Harmless, and useless," Joe snorted. He tossed off the Scotch and poured some more. "He inherited his job, his money, and his reputation. If he'd had to make it on his own, he'd never have been more than a law clerk. Up to now he was being bolstered up by Pete and me. What he had, he'd never earned and didn't deserve. In this world, Nell, the spoils belong to those strong enough to take them."

"You mean ruthless enough, don't you?" Nell asked.

"All right, ruthless enough," Joe said. "Use any word you want. I'm strong enough and I'm ruthless enough, and I'm going to have what A.J. had. Only I'll have earned it, and he never did. There's only one thing I'm worried about."

"Your conscience?" Nell sounded sardonic. "Don't tell me you're worried for fear your conscience is going to trouble you at this late date?"

"Never heard of the word," Joe assured. "What I'm worried about is Pete. He thinks he's strong and ruthless, but he isn't. He's just greedy, and scared."

"And me?" she asked. "What am I, Joe?"

He came close to her, put his free arm around her, and pulled her tightly to him. She did not resist, and he smiled down into her face.

"You're ruthless too," he said. "That's what we have in common. That's why we're going to get along so well together."

He kissed her again. This time her thoughts were not elsewhere. But, briefly, his were. He interrupted the kiss suddenly to frown at her.

"What is it?" she asked.

"It's Pete," he said. "I've just realized I'm going to have to give Pete a lot of thought. Yes, a lot of thought. I've sent him off for a holiday. When he gets back I may have to—implement a new program of action. I thought I could smarten him up but I'm afraid he's the one who is going to have trouble with his conscience. And I can't risk that."

Outside in the street, a week later, the bands for the Decoration Day parade were becoming louder as they slowly approached. The offices in the old building were silent and empty, except for Joe Cresswell, at work on a mountain of papers. With the insurance money that A.J.'s death had provided them, he was well on the way to covering their tracks in the matter of the estate of Mary Jane Fleming. But it was something he had to

do himself and it was time-consuming.

A key turned in the lock of the outside door, and Joe looked up alertly. A moment later Pete Black strolled in, looking tanned and rested.

"Return of the prodigal," he said lightly. He was obviously in better spirits. "But for Pete's sake—meaning me—why did we have to meet here today of all days? It's a holiday and I had a date."

"Council of war," Joe said, gripping his hand. "You're looking great, boy. We can get some talk done with no one to bother us. But since it's a holiday, let's have a drink first."

"I don't usually—Oh well, all right," Pete agreed goodnaturedly. "Since it's a holiday and we're celebrating. You did say the Fleming estate was in good shape?"

"A-ok," Joe answered, getting a bottle of bourbon out for Pete, one of Scotch for himself. "Of course, there are still the other shortages, but I have an idea, a rather neat idea about those if I do say so myself. We'll get to those after I brief you about the Fleming matter."

He got ice from his personal refrigerator and made the drinks. Pete Black perched on the edge of his desk and smiled across his glass at Joe Cresswell.

"Tastes good," he said. "You've got all the data on the other shortages summarized for me?"

"Everything," Joe Cresswell told

him. "Here's to success and bottoms up."

They drained their drinks and Joe poured another round. Pete sipped at his drink and looked solemn.

"I've been doing some thinking, Joey boy," he said. "Some heavy thinking. And the result of my thinking is that I agree with you. You're right. This world is full of lions and lambs and a man has to

choose which side he wants to be on. The lions eat and the lambs get eaten."

"Now you're smartening up!" Joe exclaimed jovially. "I told you you'd see it my way. Now we can go places."

The *oompah-oompah* of the brass bands in the street outside was nearing them now. Pete Black mopped his forehead.

"Speaking of going places," he said, "it's stuffy in here. Let's go open a window and see the parade. When I was a kid I used to march in the Memorial Day parades. I still get a kick out of the bands."

"Sure thing," Joe agreed. "Make a note. Tomorrow we order air-conditioning for the whole place."

They strolled together into A.J.'s office, where the air was still as death and stuffy as a sealed tomb. Together they pushed up one of the great windows, with its sill almost at floor level. Drink in hand, Joe Cresswell leaned out and looked down. The street below was crowded with people. The band leading the parade was at the next corner heading toward them.

"There it comes," he said. "The parade honoring our beloved dead. We should drink a toast to A.J. and—"

Standing directly behind him, Pete Black put his hand between Joe Cresswell's shoulder blades and thrust sharply.

"So long, *fall* guy," he said.

Joe gave a startled yell that became a scream, and hurtled out the window with his full glass still in his hand. The scream went downward and was lost in a sudden clamor of drums and bugles from the band in the street. Pete Black backed away so that no one could see him, and turned.

NELL LANGLEY stood in the doorway, looking at him. For a moment neither of them spoke.

Then, "You killed him," she said. "You killed Joe."

"I had to." Pete Black's lips were tight. His tan had paled. "After all, it was you who warned me that he was going to kill me."

"Yes." Her eyes were haunted. "He would have. I know he would have. And in time—me. I'm sure of it. He hadn't thought that far ahead, but I could tell. In time I'd have been next."

She came close, and he put his arms around her. He kissed her, and she sighed when the kiss was finished.

"Now he's gone," she said. "I have all the figures from him on the other shortages, and we can cover everything up between us. Oh, Joe, Joe, I was so frightened for a while. For you. And for me. And us."

"He said he'd smarten me up," Pete said, his smile sardonic. "And he did. I learned from him in time to take preventive action and protect myself.

"Now listen," he went on, after

a pause. "The police are probably being called now. They'll have to identify him, and then they'll come up here. The building is shut, so it'll take ten or fifteen minutes for them to get here. We were working the whole time. We knew Joe had been drinking, and he said something about getting some air and seeing the parade. We didn't go with him—we stayed working and didn't know anything had happened. We were together the whole time, in my office—working. Got it?"

She nodded, and they went back to Pete Black's office, hurrying now. Nell brought in a stack of papers and they began to work in earnest, but with only half their minds, listening as they worked for the first knock, the first official intimation that Joe Cresswell was dead.

They hardly settled down with the first account sheets before the knock came. They looked at each other in alarm.

"Too soon!" Pete muttered. "They're here too soon. The main entrance is on the cross street. There hasn't been time enough for anyone to identify Joe, and deduce he fell from this office."

The knock on the outer door came again, louder.

"But they're here," Nell whispered, her lips white. "What shall we do?"

"Let them in," Pete Black said. He was sweating. His mouth twitched. "I feel—sick. Reaction, I guess. You go, stall them a minute. Let me drink some ice water and pull myself together. Don't worry. I won't give anything away. But go to the door and take as long as you can."

"All right," Nell said. She rose. "Take off your coat, open your collar—look as if you'd been working hard."

She went out, walking briskly down the long corridor toward the frosted panels which showed the shadows of two men beyond it. She composed her features as she went. When she opened the door, she was the efficient, competent secretary again.

The two men were standing outside. One was Andrews, the insurance company man who had been there several times previously, in connection with the death of A.J. Adams. The other was a bulky man in plainclothes whose whole bearing said *detective* as plainly as if he wore a badge proclaiming the fact pinned to his lapel.

"Oh, Mr. Andrews," Nell said, making her tone just faintly surprised. "We weren't expecting you. The office is actually closed."

"I know," the insurance adjuster said shortly, and Nell was alarmed by the way he was looking at her. "This is Inspector Wright of the Police Department. We want to see Mr. Cresswell?"

"But I don't understand—" Nell began. They had, however,

stepped in and she was forced to close the door and turn toward them. "Mr. Cresswell is in his office, I think, but—"

She was speaking at random, feeling sure that they did not know Joe Cresswell was dead, trying to discover their errand, and not lose her poise.

"Mr. Cresswell phoned earlier and asked me to be here exactly at three o'clock and to bring someone from the police with me," Andrews said sharply. "Now may I see Mr. Cresswell, please?"

"Why—why of course." With an effort she refrained from biting her lip. "I believe he was in his office a few minutes ago. Mr. Black and I have been working together—"

"We want to see Mr. Black too." This time it was Inspector Wright who spoke, ponderously. "Officially."

"Officially?" Nell stared at them blankly.

"When Mr. Cresswell telephoned, Miss Langley," Andrews said, "he told me that Black had confessed to embezzling funds from several estates he was administering, and that he would have proof for us this afternoon. Now please show us to Mr. Cresswell and ask Mr. Black to join us."

"Yes, yes, of course," Nell said blankly. "I'm sure there's some mistake but Mr. Black is in his office. I'll—I'll find Mr. Cresswell."

She hurried ahead of him down the hall, almost running to reach

the office first. As she burst into the room, she was already speaking, swiftly, keeping her voice low.

"Pete! Joe was turning you in. He was going to try to pin—"

Then she stopped, putting her hand to her mouth. Pete Black was slumped forward on his desk. Now he raised his head with a tremendous effort.

"Nell," he whispered, "Joe put something—in my liquor. Poison. That's how—he was going—to make me—the fall guy. I'd be a suicide and—that would be an admission of guilt."

He managed a grimace, a horrible grin as if a skull had tried to smile. "But he smartened me up. I learned his lesson—too well. He never figured I'd get him first before the poison—could work . . ."

Then the words ceased coming from his mouth. His eyes rolled up in his head. He fell forward and his forehead thumped the desk top, overturning a bottle of ink that ran in a red flood onto the floor.

"What—" It was Inspector Wright, entering behind Nell. But he did not finish the question. He stepped past her and picked up Pete Black's limp arm—the same arm that had, a few minutes earlier, thrust Joe Cresswell out the window to his death.

The policeman felt for the pulse and waited. Then he dropped the arm again. It sagged limply against Black's inert body.

"He's dead!" Wright said, lips tight. "Now where is Cresswell?"

It was then the other knocks came, the knocks on the outer door they had expected and planned for. The knocks that meant Joe Cresswell's dead body had been found and identified.

"Well?" the detective asked. *"Where is Cresswell?"*

But Nell Langley could only shake her head, her eyes on Pete Black's dead face. Her lips moved, but the words would not come out.

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An Unusually Suspenseful Mystery Novelet

by BARRY PEROWNE

More than one historic crime . . . veiled in dark mystery . . . has caused a Dukedom to change hands, and a scoundrel to live in dread of retribution. But the Master of Derehurst was twentieth-century adroit, and scornful of history.

The Hellfire Master

IN THE Canadian Rockies, we missed meeting the Master by one fatal month. Not that we were looking for him or even thinking about him on the hot August afternoon when we saw the trestle bridge bearing the signpost marked: *To Derehurst Ranch.*

Unexpected as the sight was, Prosper turned our dusty estate car immediately off the road, drove cross the bridge spanning the rapids foaming in a deep ravine, and followed the trail that wound steeply upward through the pine forest.

"Is this wise?" I said.

"It's irresistible, Timmy. That signpost appearing so suddenly, out of the blue. We can't pass by without having just a look at the place."

"At the time of the law suit," I reminded him, "your picture was plastered all over the world's newspapers. What if someone on the ranch should recognize you?"

"The law suit was two years ago," he said. "It's ancient history now."

The car topped a rise in the trail, and he pulled up abruptly. His keen face tanned, his blond hair close-cut, he offered me a cigarette from his case as he looked thoughtfully through his sunglasses at the ranch valley spread before us. He held his lighter first to my cigarette, then to his own.

"The place is a paradise, Timmy."

"A paradise lost," I said. The sunlit meadows, the timbered mountainsides, the snow-capped

summits serene against the blue sky, brought to my mind an old, bitter truism. " 'He who will not when he may,' " I said, " 'when he will, he shall have nay.' "

"Stop brooding about that law suit," he said. "Let's see what's going on in that corral over there."

He headed the car for the corral. Men were standing around it, exhilarated whoops were echoing across the valley. As Prosper pulled up again and we walked across to the corral, I noticed a man who was sitting on the top rail. About our own age, the early thirties, he was watching our approach. He had an authoritative air, and two years of keeping body and soul together by chance adventures—from which I rarely had been able to extract any material advantage without going behind Prosper's back, as he was tediously scrupulous—had made me allergic to authority.

I kept a sidelong eye on the man perched on the corral rail, saw him roll a cigarette meditatively. All the time he was watching Prosper's tall, casual figure as he stood with his hands linked lightly behind him and looked on with interest at the equine commotion in the corral.

The man on the rail gave his cigarette a lick, climbed down from the rail, and walked across to us. "Passing through?" he asked.

"Yes," said Prosper, "just tourists."

"My name's Kemp. I'm manager of this ranch."

"If we're frightening the horses," Prosper said, in his easy way, "and you'd prefer us to move on—"

"Well, now—" Kemp looked us over with shrewd eyes—"I think you may be the parties I have instructions about from the owner of the ranch, the Duke of Devizes—standing instructions sent by him two years ago, from Derehurst Castle in England, to managers of all his properties."

Only too well I knew that many fine properties belonged to the rich Devizes dukedom, including a deer forest in Scotland, estates in Kenya and Andalusia, villas at Cannes, Bermuda and in the Bahamas—and this ranch in the Rockies.

Prosper said pleasantly to Kemp, "Indeed?"

Some of the ranch hands were watching us, and I felt pretty uneasy.

Kemp looked hard at Prosper's sunglasses. "My instructions apply to the ex-duke, now known as Mr. Fair, and his one-time business manager, Mr. Timothy Shee."

"In that case," Prosper said evenly, "they apply to my friend here and myself."

"Then I'm instructed," said the ranch manager, "that if ever you should chance to stop by, I'm to put out the red carpet for you. Welcome to the Derehurst Ranch, gentlemen."

I breathed again. For a moment, I had feared that we were likely to get run off the place. I admitted as much to Prosper as we were smoking a final cigarette apiece that night in his room, the principal guest room of the ranch house.

"I don't see why you should have feared that, Timmy," he said.

"You don't? Let me tell you many a man who'd brought claim to a dukedom and made it stick, in a law suit unique in this century, would have given very different instructions about the man he'd ruined."

"Ruined," said Prosper. "The words you use, Timmy! Why do you let the law suit rankle with you? After all, I never expected to succeed to the dukedom. You know that. We were in the navy together. The news of the succession came as a complete surprise to me. I resigned my commission and invited you to resign yours and act as my business manager, and we had five very good years—to which I at least, as the law suit proved, never had really been entitled. But, after all, I couldn't have bowed out to a better fellow than that tough old Australian, Wyndham Dirk."

"But look at our position on this ranch," I said. "We're mere guests on a place you once owned. Can you top that for irony?"

"It's certainly a pity," he said equably, "that our five years at Derehurst Castle were so busy that we never had a chance to visit the overseas properties. But we can't travel back in time and change the past."

"The real pity, if you ask me," I said, "is that you didn't take my advice as your business manager and accept the settlement the new duke offered you."

"Go to bed, Timmy," said Prosper.

I went. But I lay long awake in the second best guest room, brooding on that old, bitter truism: "He who will not when he may—"

"I'm glad you don't feel I'm to blame," the successful Australian had said, when Prosper had congratulated him on the outcome of the law suit. "It's just fate. You got clobbered by a million to one chance. Well, it's over with, now. The lawyers have been talking for eight months through their wigs, but now it's just you and me talking—man to man. How much do you figure you need, Prosper?"

"Need?"

The sixty-year-old Australian was gaunt, hawk-headed, with intensely blue eyes. "I've lived in the Outback all my life," he had said. "I'm a hard man and I know my rights. But I'm no hog. As an ex-duke, after all the publicity and garbled talk that this affair has stirred up, you won't find it too easy to live an ordinary life. You'll find that people won't let you. So

tell me what you need to get along. The Devizes bankroll can stand it. Carve yourself off a slice, and the thicker it is, the less bad I'll feel about this whole unfortunate case."

To my anguish as his business manager, Prosper had said, "I'm the one who should feel bad, Wyndham—not you. In effect, I've stolen five ducal years from your life. If anybody owes anybody a settlement, it's I who owe you one."

KNOWING HE STILL felt this way, I almost groaned aloud as I lay gazing out sleeplessly at the moonlit peaks of the Rockies.

With fine horses to ride, and rainbow trout to be fished for in the mountain streams to which Bob Kemp, the ranch manager, and Jill, his attractive blonde young wife, introduced us, the next few days only increased my painful awareness of what we had lost.

"Just look at it," I said bitterly, reining in my horse one afternoon on a trial high up near timberline. "Do you realize, Prosper, that if you'd taken my advice when you were offered a settlement, the Derehurst Ranch—and all that down there in the valley—would be yours today!"

"I don't recall your mentioning the ranch at the time, Timmy," he said dryly. "Anyway, doesn't the Devizes entail prevent the duke from parting with real estate?"

"The entail applies only to property in England," I said. " 'He who will not—' "

He gave me an inscrutable look through his sunglasses, clicked his tongue at his horse, and moved on down the trail.

That night at dinner, reproaching himself for never having visited the ranch when he owned it, he asked Bob Kemp if the new duke had been out to see it yet.

"He's coming next year," said Kemp. "But about a month ago we had his heir visit us for a few days —the Master of Derehurst, as he's called."

"His name was Roy Dirk," I said. "If he'd been Wyndham Dirk's son, he'd have come into a marquisate when Wyndham Dirk succeeded as Duke of Devizes. As Wyndham Dirk's next of kin, Roy Dirk's his statutory heir. But as he's only a nephew, he just gets the traditional title that derives from the house he has a right to—Derehurst Manor, about eight miles from the Castle."

"Timmy knows all about that sort of thing," said Prosper. "What sort of chap is the Master of Derehurst, Bob? We've never met him."

Kemp hesitated. "He's about thirty and looks good on a horse."

"He'd look good anywhere," said Jill Kemp. "Oh, he's quite a man—to look at. Whether he's English or Australian I wouldn't know. He talks with a kind of an

Oxford accent. But he's the hell-bent-for-adventure type. He's been around the Pacific islands with a schooner—'trading,' he called it. He was in his cups here one night—"

"Now, Jill," said Kemp.

"Prosper and the duke are good friends, Bob," she said. "We know that from the red carpet order the duke sent. I don't see any harm in telling Prosper that some of the Master of Derehurst's yarns about adventures he'd had, things he had done—well, I've never listened to anything so unprincipled! Of course, he may have just been sounding off, but I doubt it. Bob, tell them about that instruction you had from the duke recently."

Kemp looked uncomfortable, and I said cunningly, just to encourage him, "Prosper considers himself in the duke's debt for five years accidentally usurped from him."

"You see, Bob?" said Jill. "Go on, tell them about that instruction."

"It was a hell of a thing," Kemp said. "All the Devizes estate managers outside England got an instruction not to advance money to the heir."

"That doesn't sound like the duke," said Prosper. "He struck me as a generous man. Perhaps the Master of Derehurst's been a bit wild."

"Wild!" said Jill, rolling her pretty eyes at the ceiling.

"A man can get away with being called 'wild,'" I said, "up to the age of about twenty-five. After that—and the Master's thirty, Bob says—harsher words apply."

"And I can think of some," said our hostess, "but they'd be unprintable."

Unfortunately, the conversation then became general, and I was left wondering whether the Master of Derehurst during his visit to the ranch had tried to touch the Kemps. But the very next morning, as we were finishing breakfast, Bob told Prosper that he'd be glad of a word with him, and the ranch manager's expression was so grave that I thought it as well to sit in on the conference, and I followed them into the ranch office.

Kemp rolled a cigarette. "I was feeling guilty, Prosper, about the way Jill and I shot off our mouths last night," he said. "Now, I'm glad it happened. If I'm any judge, you wish well to the dukedom of Devizes, and I'd be glad to hear what you think about this telegram that came through on the 'phone just after we went up to bed last night."

He handed Prosper a page torn from a message-pad, and I craned to read the pencilled words: "Remit twenty thousand dollars immediately to my credit First Pacific-Occidental Bank, Avernus, Nevada, U.D.A. Wire confirmation to me in care Avernus Inn. Derehurst."

"Avernus?" I said. "That city's an up-and-coming rival to Las Vegas and Reno. I read a magazine article about it once. Its gambling enterprises are controlled by a syndicate headed by a beautiful Rita Marmol—who also owns the Avernus Inn, one of the world's newest luxury hotels."

Prosper said, "You already have instructions from the duke on the subject of advancing money to the Master of Derehurst, Bob."

"I know it," said Kemp worriedly. "Yet I don't like to just ignore this telegram. How serious a jam is the Devizes heir in down there? Is there any danger that the duke's own good name might get spattered?"

"I wouldn't like that any more than you would," Prosper agreed. "As Timmy told you last night, I feel myself to be in the duke's debt. There may be a chance here to be of some service to him. If you think it'd be any help, Bob, Timmy and I could go down there and find out for you just what the situation is."

"Would you do that?" Kemp said, and his eyes brightened.

I felt my own eyes brighten, too, as I said, "Prosper, I strongly advise that Bob let us have the twenty thousand in cash to take along with us—just in case."

The ex-duke gave me a grey, cool look. "That won't be necessary, Timmy."

I felt my eyes dull.

IN NEVADA, we missed meeting the Master by about nineteen hours of remarkable activity—on his part.

After our two-day drive, so much of it across desert, I was glad to expose my sunburn to the breathstopping assault of an ice-cold shower at the Avernus Inn. I dressed and went next door to Prosper's room, where I found him in the act of putting down the telephone.

"Timmy, the hotel manager wants to see us."

"Probably wants a look at our passports," I said. "Avernus is a gambling city, and we're aliens—possibly undesirable."

The manager proved to be a lean, dark, efficient-looking man wearing a white dinner-jacket. Admitting us to his luxurious office, he introduced himself as Wade Rawlins, and had shaken us by the hand before I noticed that a slender, dark-haired woman dressed with simplicity and elegance was standing at the window gazing out at the dazzle and throb of the city's neons.

"Mr. Fair and Mr. Shee—Miss Marmol," said Wade Rawlins.

The head of the gambling syndicate that also owned this famous hotel turned and looked at us with fine dark eyes in an ivory-pale, beautiful face. She gave us the slightest of bows, motioned us to be seated, and sat down, herself, in a chair by the window, crossing legs that Lloyds of London would have felt privileged to insure.

Rawlins, who seemed tense, offered us cigarettes. "Mr. Fair," he said, "I understand that when you registered at the desk, you inquired for—the Master of Derehurst."

Prosper nodded. "I was told he checked out yesterday."

"Not exactly," said Rawlins. "He just went. His bags are still in his room here. His car—what remains of it after a crash he was in—is still here."

"Are you suggesting he's absconded?"

"He certainly has—yesterday morning. Headed for New York by air." Wade Rawlins' eyes glinted. "I'm sorry to have to tell you this, Mr. Fair, but the man's a thief. He's made off with a—a kind of keepsake from Miss Marmol's purse."

"I'm sorry to hear that," said Prosper. "I suppose you're quite certain that this man is in fact the Master of Derehurst and not some impostor?"

"Absolutely certain," said Rawlins. "He's been here a month. We had reason to check up on him early in his stay. We have ways and means. He's just who he claimed to be—the Master of Derehurst, heir to the Duke of Devizes."

"This keepsake?" said Prosper.

"It's a roulette chip," said Rawlins, "worth fifty dollars."

"Fifty dollars!" I exclaimed. "He won't get far on fifty dollars!"

"There's an I.O.U. written across the chip, Mr. Shee," Rawlins told me.

"An I.O.U.? said Prosper. "For twenty thousand dollars, by any chance?"

"That precise sum, Mr. Fair," said Rawlins, giving Prosper a searching look. "It's an informal I.O.U., signed just 'Roy.'"

"Just 'Roy,'" Prosper murmured.

Carefully, he did not look at Rita Marmol. Neither did I. What

must have happened was embarrassingly obvious. For all her poise and experience, Rita Marmol must have fallen deeply in love with Roy Dirk, the Master of Derehurst, to have lent him twenty thousand dollars on such frail security.

In fact, if she had been that much in love, probably she had protested at the suggestion of any mundane I.O.U. at all. With a man-of-honor insistence, no doubt, the Master had fished the roulette chip from his pocket, scribbled the I.O.U. and, over her affectionate protest, tucked it into her purse with his own perjured fingers. I could just picture the scene.

"The I.O.U. was written one evening two weeks ago," said Rawlins.

I nodded understandingly. It was certainly an evening-type transaction—a late-evening type—consummated to music over a magnum of champagne.

"Subsequently," said Wade Rawlins, "Derehurst lost most of the money at the tables. But we felt no uneasiness about him till the night before last, when we opened a big new floor show here at the Inn and he was Miss Marmol's escort. Accidentally, during the evening, he knocked her purse off the table."

"And was quick to pick it up for her," I said cynically, for I guessed what was coming. "A perfect gentleman!"

"Yesterday noon," said Rawlins, "Miss Marmol missed that roulette chip and asked me to have a search made, which I did—without result. It hardly seemed possible that the Master of Derehurst, heir to the Duke of Devizes would rifle a woman's purse. Still, I went to talk with him—and found he'd flown out earlier, for New York. I telephoned our associates there, and I've had news of him just this afternoon. At this minute, he's in another airliner somewhere over the Atlantic, bound for London."

"Mr. Rawlins," said Prosper thoughtfully, "if you've made these confidences to us under the impression that we know the Master of Derehurst, I'm afraid you're mistaken. We've never met him."

Rita Marmol spoke for the first time. "We know you're the ex-Duke of Devizes, Mr. Fair."

"You surprise me, Miss Marmol."

"When we checked up on Derehurst a month ago," said Rita Marmol, "we read about the law suit—and the duke who lost out and became plain Mr. Fair. So when we were informed that a Mr. Fair had been inquiring at the desk for Derehurst, we knew who you must be." Her dark eyes studied Prosper. "You mentioned just now—before Mr. Rawlins did—the exact sum involved in this matter."

Prosper explained, "The manager of the duke's ranch in the Ca-

nadian Rockies, where Timothy Shee and I happened to be spending a few days, showed us a telegram from Derehurst asking for an urgent advance of that amount. To oblige the ranch manager, Timothy Shee and I came here to inquire into the situation that prompted Derehurst's telegram. That's the only reason we're here."

Rita Marmol frowned. "You're not here, then, with authority to settle Derehurst's debt?"

"What a hope!" I said, with a laugh.

Prosper gave me a cold look.

"Well, frankly, Mr. Fair," said Rawlins, "what you tell us is a disappointment to us. You see the position. He's defaulted. He's pulled this fast one and got clear away to England. Maybe if we were to communicate the facts to the Duke of Devizes himself—"

"I know the duke," Prosper said. "And I happen to know of an instruction given by him that clearly shows he's washed his hands of his heir's financial affairs."

I saw Rita Marmol's knuckles whiten and her eyes betray momentarily—an emotion deeper than anger at a money loss—her hurt and hatred as a woman.

"Mr. Fair," she said, "would you mind if I asked you a personal question?"

"You've read the law suit proceedings, apparently," Prosper said, with a shrug. "You know all my history."

"Except," she said, "how does an *ex*-duke live?"

"We often wonder," said Prosper ruefully. "Don't we, Timmy?"

"An ex-duke's position is a difficult one," I said cautiously.

"But it also has advantages—at times," said Rita Marmol. "For instance, I don't know how to collect from this man now that he's got away to England. But *you* know the ropes there, the circles he moves in, the social background on a ducal level."

She leaned forward in her chair. "Frankly, the money doesn't matter to me. I'm not interested in seeing it. But I don't want him to get away with this, Mr. Fair. It would give me some personal satisfaction to see irrefutable proof that the debt had been collected."

I looked at Prosper eagerly. She was offering him the twenty thousand dollars—if he could collect it.

"Miss Marmol," he said, "I think that what the Master of Derehurst has done is despicable. My sympathy is sincerely with you. But I'm sorry—I don't feel I can advise you in this matter." He rose. "If you'll excuse us now—"

He had rejected her offer. I had difficulty in controlling my anger. He had no idea about money. He took it for granted. He never had known how much or how little I had salved, as his business manager, from the wreckage after the law suit. If I told him we could afford this or that, well and good; if

I said we couldn't, then we couldn't. He was perfectly indifferent to money.

DURING DINNER and the floor show in the Avernus Inn's great dining-room, glass-walled on one side so that it seemed open to the violet night and the desert stars, I felt so frustrated that I said hardly a word. But afterward, when he suggested we look in at the chief of the gambling places controlled by Miss Marmol's syndicate, I realized that his mind still was running on our interview with her. For as we were looking on at the roulette, he suddenly asked me a question.

"Timmy, why did he send that telegram?"

"The Master?" I said, frowning.

"Yes. If he'd really believed he could get that advance from Bob Kemp, surely the obvious thing to have done would have been to telephone the ranch and arrange the matter personally. Yet he sends that telegram. And the same evening, a few hours later, he filches that I.O.U. chip. And next morning, before he's allowed barely enough time to get a reply to his telegram, he's on his way out of this city."

"He probably didn't pin much hope to the telegram," I said. "He may have known very well that the duke had issued instructions that he was to be given no advances."

"That's what I think," Prosper said. "He expected that the telegram would be ignored. But in that case, why did he bother to send it? He must have had *some* reason."

We were sauntering from one to another of the crowded, busy tables. Hands linked lightly behind him, the tall, blond ex-duke meditatively watched the croupiers' rakes manipulating the stacks of bills, the towers of round or square chips.

"I see that the fifty-dollar chips used in Avernus Enterprises establishments," he remarked, "are square—like the *plaques* at Monte Carlo. Timmy, why did he bother to filch that chip back from Miss Marmol?"

"Obviously," I said, "because it was an I.O.U."

"But it was valueless, Timmy—as such. If he defaulted and bolted back to England, Rita Marmol would be in no better position to collect if she had the chip than if she hadn't. What's more, he must have known that to filch it from her purse would be inevitably to create her and Wade Rawlins' first doubts and suspicions about him. Yet he went ahead and filched it. Why? He must have had *some* good reason."

"Prosper," I said, for by now I was quivering with impatience to act on an inspiration of my own, "we've had a long day. I'm too tired to cope with the psychology

of the Master of Derehurst now—it's too deep for me." I feigned a yawn. "I think I'll turn in."

"You go ahead, Timmy."

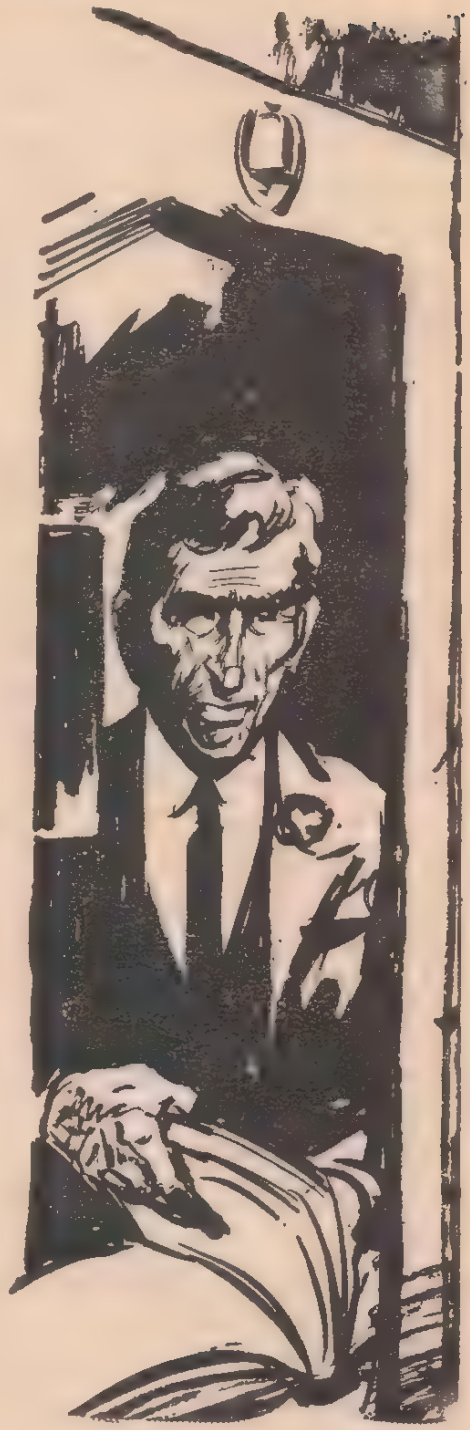
I went back in a hurry to the Avernus Inn, knocked on the door of Wade Rawlins' office, and was relieved to hear his "Yes? Come in, please."

He was sitting at his streamlined great desk. And I was delighted to see that Rita Marmol was in the room. She was standing at the window, gazing out at the neon furnace. She turned as I entered. She was now in evening dress. She looked so marvellous that it seemed to me that the Master of Derehurst must have been insane to lose her by doing what he had done.

"I can only stop a minute, Miss Marmol," I said. "Please understand that I speak now as Mr. Fair's business manager through seven years of—extremes of fortune. Tonight you made him a proposition, the terms of which seemed to me perfectly clear."

She inclined her head slightly.

"I must explain to you," I said, "that as an ex-duke Mr. Fair is a unique and—in England, anyway—a conspicuous figure. He can't set foot on his native soil without starting a lot of newspaper gossip rehashing the law suit. So, to avoid embarrassing the present duke—to whom, strange as it may seem, he feels himself obligated—he makes it a rule to keep out of England.



That's why his immediate response to your proposition this evening was negative."

"Because it would mean his following Derehurst to England?"

"Exactly," I said. "But I've been working on Mr. Fair over dinner, and I'm glad to tell you that I've so stimulated his interest in the behavior of the Master of Derehurst that I think Mr. Fair's on the very brink of making an exception of his self-imposed rule."

"He'll go to England?" said Rawlins.

"Strictly between our three selves here," I said, "I'm prepared, on my own responsibility as his business manager, acting on his behalf, to accept your proposition. As I understand the terms—if he can collect this debt, he's to keep the money, his only obligation being to furnish you with irrefutable proof that the debt has in fact been liquidated."

I held out my hand to Rita Marmol. "I hope a handshake will be a good enough seal on our bargain, Miss Marmol?"

She looked at me steadily for a moment, then took my hand.

"Good luck," she said.

As I left the office, I saw Rita Marmol turn to the window and stand looking out again at the neons that seemed to defy with their brave dazzle the violet-dark, brooding loneliness of the surrounding desert.

IN ENGLAND, we came within so few seconds of meeting the Master that we were responsible for a death as a result of his actions.

As I had guessed, Prosper had made up his mind to pay one of his rare flying visits to England, and I not only sold our estate car to Wade Rawlins at a slight profit but also privately negotiated for him to foot the bill for our necessary air reservations—Prosper remaining none the wiser.

Only once after leaving Nevada did we speak of our quarry. This was over mid-Atlantic, when Prosper, who had seemingly been deep in thought, remarked, "What possible counter-attraction could have made it worth Derehurst's while to spoil his chance of marrying a highly attractive woman like Rita Marmol, with all that marriage to her would have meant in wealth and power, by cheating her out of a relatively modest twenty thousand dollars?"

"I don't consider twenty thousand dollars modest," I said, for I had been thinking about them at that very moment, wondering how to extract them from this business. "But if you ask me, the Master of Derehurst couldn't help himself. He's a compulsive, pathological crook."

"H'm," said Prosper, and looked down absently at the leagues of cloud-floor billowing under a moon shortly no doubt to be pincushioned all over with KEEP OFF notices.

At London Airport I was able to get the tall ex-duke through, wearing sunglasses, without his being surrounded by a cluck and flut-

ter of newshens feathering their nests. We went straight to a hotel and I lost no time in getting Derehurst Castle on the telephone. The butler answered.

"This is Mr. Shee, Thurston," I said. "Nice to hear your voice again. Hold on, please. Mr. Fair for you."

I handed the telephone to Prosper, who soon elicited the information that since his return to England the Master of Derehurst had been living at the Castle, as his own house eight miles away, Derehurst Manor, had been rented to Americans for the summer.

"Hold on, Thurston." Prosper glanced at me. "What's the date, Timmy?"

"August thirtieth," I said. "Why?"

Ignoring my question, Prosper said into the telephone, "Thurston, if the duke's at home, do you think he could spare a minute?" Apparently he could, for Prosper said after a few seconds, "Hallo! Wyndham? I'm in England for a few days—thought I'd give you a ring. How are you, anyway? Looking forward to September first, opening of partridge shooting? Timmy Shee and I always used to look on that as a red-letter day in the Derehurst calendar."

The outcome of the hint was that we were invited to shoot partridges, and next afternoon, from the hired car Prosper was driving, we saw again a sight once well-known to us—Derehurst Castle, among the rolling, breezy hills, grass-green and scarred white with the chalkpits of the downland country.

To us, doomed now probably to be always exiles and roamers, it was like coming home. Nothing seemed to have changed. Deer still browsed in the oak-dotted fields ringed round by a shallow, broad, grass-grown depression that once had been a moat and still was known as Fairdirk's Belt, named for the Viking raider who had built the castle and fathered the collateral family lines of the Fairs and the Dirks. From the flagstaff of the castle keep, which in our time here had been used as a stores by the local Civil Defence, the familiar banner of the Dukes of Devizes flew in the light airs and the sunshine.

The gaunt, hawk-headed Australian with the intensely blue eyes, who now owned it all, was waiting on the terrace to shake hands with us.

"Saw you coming, Prosper. Come on in. Thurston's just put the billy on to boil."

In the duke's study, once Prosper's, we found the butler making tea. An imperturbable, seemingly ageless man who had been at the Castle since boyhood, he put down the electric-kettle to shake hands with Prosper.

"A pleasure to see you again, sir. It's been a long time." He

shook hands with me, too. "You're looking tanned, Mr. Shee."

"They got that tan in the Canadian Rockies, Thurston," said the duke—though we had picked up most of it in Nevada, actually. "Eh, Prosper? I had a line from Kemp. He told me you'd stopped by to see the ranch."

When Thurston had left us, the duke asked Prosper his impression of Kemp.

"First rate," Prosper said.

"That's not what my heir tells me. He was out there a few weeks back—says he thought damned little of Kemp and his wife."

"Then I must differ from him," said Prosper. "I think you're lucky to have Bob and Jill Kemp in charge of the ranch."

"Don't worry," said the duke. "I never believe a word my heir says. He can't open his mouth without twisting things around to make a lie look like the truth. I can tell you this much—he's given me two damned uncomfortable years. I wish he'd throttle himself on one of his lies so that his young brother would be in line to inherit—a good, straightforward lad, away at university. You wouldn't credit some of the—" He broke off as a knock on the door brought Thurston in bearing a salver. "Afternoon post, Thurston? Anything for him?"

"A letter, Your Grace, and one of the American magazines he subscribes to."

Thurston put the salver holding letters and a magazine-roll on the desk before the wide, tall windows standing open to the terrace and the park beyond.

"Damned disturbing mail," said the duke, as Thurston went out. "That'll give you a notion of what I've been through, Prosper. A year ago, I discovered that some very queer correspondence was coming into this castle whenever the Master of Derehurst happened to be here. I gave strict orders that whenever he's under this roof his mail's to be brought to me first—and if I'm not available, put on my desk here.

"I dole his mail out to him personally, after I've cast an eye over the envelopes. If there's anything that worries me I ask questions, and I see to it I get answers."

"How does that set with your heir?" Prosper asked.

"There's a row about it every time it happens," said the duke. "As soon as he hears the mail van, around seven-thirty, he comes straight downstairs with a belligerent look in his eyes. But he gets no satisfaction out of Thurston—and he doesn't dare lay a finger on him. He did it just once. You noticed that scar over Thurston's right eye?"

"Yes," Prosper said. "I was wondering how he got that."

"My hot-tempered heir laid him out cold one morning for carrying out my orders about the mail. I

told him that if ever he laid a finger on a member of my household again I'd blow a hole right through his throat—even if I had to stand trial. And he knows I meant it. He's ruined his own household at Derehurst Manor, and can't get anyone to work for him now. That's why he rents the place out, preferably to American tenants. He likes American money. He's up to his neck in hot water over a matter of twenty thousand this very minute."

I met Prosper's eyes fleetingly. And Prosper said, "That's a tidy sum, Wyndham."

"A tidy sum," the duke agreed. "He's run out of Nevada owing it to some big gambling syndicate there. The conceited, arrogant young pup has gone too far this time. He's tried to outsmart a rich, powerful American outfit. If they decide to put the finger on him there's nowhere to hide—and he knows it.

"They can send cold-blooded, professional undercover men anywhere in the world to make an example of a doublecrossing defaulter—a permanent example. That's just another way of saying he's very likely to end up stone cold dead."

I stared. My face must have shown my incredulity. In sober fact, though it was true I had said nothing to Prosper about my bargain with Rita Marmol, and that he and I were the undercover men she had assigned to deal with the Master of Derehurst. I could distinctly feel again the grip of her slim fingers as we had shaken hands on our compact.

Prosper was frowning. "Did you hear this Nevada story from Bob Kemp, Wyndham?"

"Kemp? What's it got to do with Kemp?" said the duke. "No, my heir admitted it to me himself. He can't raise the money, and he's in a cold sweat about what this Nevada outfit might do to him. He tried to touch me for the money."

"And you refused?" asked Prosper.

"I certainly did. 'Not a penny,' I told him. 'You deliberately put your head on the chopping block. *You're* the new Master of Derehurst now. Saving yourself is your problem.' He's been to everyone around, trying to raise this loan. Not a hope! I tell you, he's sweating. He's damned sorry he's got American tenants in Derehurst Manor now—the people who forward his magazines on here. You see, he's never notified them of his change of address."

"The tenants have been there all summer, haven't they?" Prosper asked.

The duke nodded. "They get a steady stream of house guests—visiting Americans. How does he know that one of them might not turn out to be from Nevada—here with a little mortuary job to attend to?"

Prosper took a cigarette from his case. "Where's the Master now?"

"Out at a Horse Show," said the duke. "That's about all he's good for—jumping horses over hurdles to get himself a big hand from not very bright society girls. Those bowler-hatted sheilas who get their pictures in the snob weeklies. They think the hell-raising Master of Derehurst is quite a man."

So, I remembered, had Rita Marmol—for a while.

The duke allotted us our old familiar rooms in the Castle, and at midnight we went up to bed—reluctantly on my part, for I had been impatient all evening to set eyes on the Master of Derehurst, and he still had not returned.

In the night, I heard him. Suddenly I found myself tensely awake, listening. A faint creaking sounded from the gallery landing outside my door. Someone was moving stealthily along the landing. I guessed it was him. I propped myself on an elbow. I listened intently, holding my breath, but heard only the strange, flitting cries of the small ground owls out in the park.

IN THE MORNING, when I went downstairs a little after seven o'clock, I found Prosper alone in the sunny breakfast-room helping himself to kidneys and bacon from one of the chafing-dishes on the sideboard. As I joined him, Thurston came in with a pot of coffee and a rack of toast for us. Prosper asked him if the duke was down yet.

"Yes, sir. He's had breakfast and gone off somewhere in the Land-rover with the head gamekeeper. He said for you and Mr. Shee please to choose whatever guns you fancy from the gun-room and go to Fairsbraid Farm. The neighbors and tenants are meeting there, sir, and the shoot will start from there at eight-thirty."

"Thank you, Thurston. Has the Master of Derehurst had breakfast yet?"

The butler shook his head. "No, sir. He was first down this morning. He went out riding on the downs."

"He must have a lot of vitality," I said.

While we were at breakfast, I saw the small mail van coming up the drive. In a couple of minutes, it went away again, flickering redly in and out of the shadows of the great oaks, in the sunshine of the glittering, bright, breezy day.

"I don't hear the Master of Derehurst complaining about his mail this morning," I remarked.

"No," said Prosper thoughtfully.

We were coming back across the hall, after choosing guns and cartridge-cases for ourselves in the gun-room, when Prosper paused and looked across at the door of the duke's study. It was closed. The big main door of the hall was

standing wide open to the sunny terrace. Thurston came out of the breakfast-room.

Prosper turned to him. "Thurston, did the duke say whether he'd be returning here before going on to the farm?" he asked.

"Yes, sir. He said he'd look in for a moment to see the mail. He always likes to see it before he goes out for a whole day. Shall I put those guns and things in your car for you, sir? It's outside. I had it brought around."

"Thank you, Thurston." But Prosper didn't move. "Thurston, the duke tells me that if he isn't available when the post comes, you put it in his study and lock the door and windows."

"Yes, sir, I did so when it came at seven-thirty. Naturally, if there had been letters for you or Mr. Shee, I should have brought them directly to you."

Prosper glanced at his watch. "It's five minutes to eight. Is the Master of Derehurst back from his ride yet?"

"Not yet, sir."

"Isn't it unusual for him not to appear when the post comes?"

"Yes, sir, it is," Thurston said, and his fingers touched lightly for an instant the scar on his lined forehead, over the right eye.

"Thurston," said Prosper, "was there any post for the Master of Derehurst this morning? I wouldn't ask you that question from idle curiosity."

"I'm sure of that, sir—I worked for you for five good years. The only mail for the Master of Derehurst this morning was an American magazine. He subscribes to several of them."

"What a nuisance for the American tenants of Derehurst Manor," Prosper said. "It must be damned annoying to have to readdress, to the Castle here, a constant stream of magazines and drop them back in the mail! If I were the tenant of Derehurst Manor, I think I'd resent so thankless a task. I might even resent it enough to push a stinkbomb into one of those magazine-rolls before forwarding it—just to stimulate him into notifying the magazines of his change of address."

Thurston's strong face was impassive, but his eyes were intent on Prosper. So were my own.

"Trading on our old friendship, Thurston," he said, "I'm going to ask you to entrust me with something for a few minutes—in the duke's absence."

Thurston took a key-ring on a thin chain from his trousers pocket. He detached one of the many keys.

"I appreciate this, Thurston," Prosper said. He put his gun and cartridge-case on the hall table, took the key. "I'll use it with care," he said—"great care. Stay here a minute. You, too, Timmy."

He walked across the hall to the door of the duke's study. As he

neared it, his pace slowed. A yard or so from the door, he checked abruptly, stood for an instant quite still, then turned and came back to us.

"Curious that I should have thought of a stinkbomb," he said, "as a justifiable expressive of resentment. Thurston, I didn't notice any geraniums in the duke's study yesterday."

"There are no geraniums in the study, sir."

"And you closed and bolted the windows when you put the mail in the study," Prosper said, "so the scent's not getting into the room from outside. Yet I caught a faint whiff of it near the study door." He glanced at me. "Remember what such olfactory warnings as a faint scent of geraniums or of mouldy hay meant to us in our Navy training days, Timmy?"

Prosper turned again to Thurston. "In my time here, Thurston, the Castle keep was used as a storehouse for the local Civil Defence."

"It still is, sir." Again Thurston drew out his ring of many keys, selected one, held it up. "I'm still the C.D. Warden in charge, sir."

"Then please go to the keep," Prosper said, "and get a respirator and a cape. And, Thurston—don't come back through the hall here or around past the study windows. And warn the rest of your staff that those areas are out of bounds. No need to tell them why."

"Certainly not, sir," said Thurston, and left us.

"Let's see what quarter the wind's in," Prosper said, and I put my own gun and cartridge-case on the hall table and accompanied him out on the terrace. "A stiff breeze from the south-west. That could be a help, Timmy."

I said, with a dry throat, "Here comes the Landrover."

THE DUKE MUST have dropped the gamekeeper off somewhere. Pulling up behind our own waiting car, he got out of the vehicle and came striding up the terrace steps to us.

"You two just off to the farm? Good! I'll be right behind you. I'm just going in for a quick look at the mail," said the duke.

"Oh, no, you're not," said the ex-duke.

"The hell I'm not!" said the duke. "I always like—" He broke off. "Thurston! What's that tackle you've got there?"

"Mr. Fair requested a respirator and cape, Your Grace," said Thurston, shaking out the sticky, stiff folds of the cape and helping Prosper into it, then handing him the haversack.

Prosper adjusted the haversack on his chest. "Thurston," he said, as he drew the respirator out of the haversack, "don't let the duke into his castle."

"Certainly not, sir."

Prosper pulled the goggled and

snouted mask over his head, walked back into the hall. Thurston took up a guard position in the centre of the great doorway.

The duke said to me, "What is it, Timmy? A gas leak? Where's it from?"

"From a magazine-roll lying on your desk, I imagine," I said—"addressed to the Master of Derehurst."

"One of his magazines from America," said the duke, "forwarded on by the American tenants at the Manor?" His hawk face tightened. So they stuffed something lethal into the magazine-roll. I might have known! My heir wasn't exaggerating the danger he's exposed himself to. That Nevada gambling syndicate *is* out to get him!"

I looked at the duke curiously. It was clear enough to me now what Prosper had been groping for when he had suggested, over the mid-Atlantic, that some powerful counter-attraction might outweigh for the Master of Derehurst even the advantages of marriage to a woman of Rita Marmol's wealth and beauty. But I saw that the duke hadn't got the true idea yet. He already believed what the Master of Derehurst had evidently planned to have the whole world believe.

To put the duke right, I said, "Who would have gone into that study, sir—you or the Master of Derehurst?"

"Me," he said, frowning.

"Ten or fifteen seconds after you'd gone in," I said, "the way the stuff's probably concentrated in there, the dukedom of Devizes would have changed hands. Without having to wait twenty or more years for it—you being a mere sixty, sir, tough and vigorous—your heir would have become the ninth Duke of Devizes."

The eighth duke looked at me. I saw his intensely blue eyes harden as he began to understand how narrowly he had escaped death. Along the terrace, the tall casement windows of the study were pushed open by the man who had been for five accidental years the seventh duke. I saw his gas-masked head for a moment before he drew back into the study.

I said, "With this stiff breeze from the south-west, the stuff's now blowing away harmlessly over the park."

There was nothing to see, but we still were standing there watching the study windows when Prosper appeared beside Thurston and handed him the respirator back. Thurston helped him off with the cape.

"I notice, sir," Thurston said, "that the triangle of detector-paint on the shoulder of the cape has changed color."

"Yes, indeed," said Prosper. "You'd better continue those out-of-bounds orders for another fifteen minutes or so, then carry on

as usual. No need to say anything to anybody, of course."

"Certainly not, sir."

Thurston went off along the terrace the opposite way from the part overlooked by the study windows, and Prosper said to the duke, "I must apologize for tossing orders so presumptuously around your castle, Wyndham."

"You don't hear me complaining, do you?" the duke said dryly. "Just what had my heir stuffed into that magazine-roll, Prosper?"

"A hollow tube of light metal alloy," Prosper said. "I've left it on your desk for the air to decontaminate it. The tube's sealed with a cap at each end. Apparently the inside of the caps have been treated with an acid. By experiment, he must have arrived at a pretty accurate idea of the time the acid would take to eat through the caps and the gas start leaking out."

"My hell fire heir!" the duke said softly.

"Pretty well any magazine-roll he'd received recently," Prosper said, "would serve his purpose—provided the wrapper had got a bit tattered in the trans-Atlantic mail. Because all these magazines reached him here with two postmarks—an American one and a local one acquired when the package was forwarded on here from Derehurst Manor. By choosing a package which had the local postmark on a tattered part of the wrapper, all he had to do was tear the local postmark off completely, stuff his gas-tube into the roll, and slip away from the Horse Show yesterday long enough to drop the roll into the postbox usually used by the tenants of Derehurst Manor."

"The magazine would be delivered here this morning," I said, "showing one local postmark—as though it had just been forwarded on by the people at the Manor. Whereas, in fact, it had been through the local mails twice."

"Which couldn't be proved," said Prosper. "Even if it could, it wouldn't necessarily implicate him. Anyone prowling round the Castle, out to get him, could have retrieved from a dustbin, and reused, a wrapper slipped off from a magazine and thrown away."

"If his gas-tube had done me in," said the duke, "would he have got away with it?"

"I think he'd stood an excellent chance, Wyndham," Prosper admitted. "On the face of it, he himself was the intended victim. The package was addressed to him. The inquiry would have led to the American tenants at Derehurst Manor, who handle, re-address and forward on his magazines to the Castle here. He'd have said—what he's taken care to let be known, anyway—that he had cause to fear a powerful American gambling syndicate. To prove it there's his telegram—from Avernus, Nevada, to Kemp, in the Ca-

nadian Rockies—urgently requesting twenty thousand dollars."

"Rita Marmol would have been questioned," I said. "What would she have answered?"

"It'd have been a bit awkward for her, Timmy," Prosper said. "He'd have claimed he gave her an I.O.U. If asked to produce the I.O.U., she couldn't have done it. Yet surely, if she hoped to collect on it, she'd have kept it. If she claimed he'd filched it from her, she couldn't *prove* her story—any more than the investigators could prove what they might well suspect—that she'd destroyed the I.O.U. herself because she'd decided it was worthless and she and her syndicate had determined to make a lethal example of the Master of Derehurst."

"He's clever," I said.

"He must have realized suddenly," said Prosper, "soon after he got that loan from Rita Marmol, that linked to other existing circumstances—American tenants in his house in England, his magazines, the fact that his mail when he's at the Castle here is taken first to the duke—he had a uniquely wonderful opportunity.

"Because his gain from your death, Wyndham, would be a dukedom, he must have known he couldn't escape some suspicion. But neither could Rita Marmol, in Avernus, Nevada. With the balance of doubt evenly suspended between the two sides of the Atlantic, he thought he'd emerge invulnerable—ninth Duke of Devizes!"

"Where is he now?" said the eighth duke.

"Not yet back from his ride, I understand," Prosper said. "What do you intend to do, Wyndham?"

"Is that magazine-roll intact?"

"Yes. I simply slid the tube out of it, to examine it. It can be slid back in."

"Then I'm going to put it back," the duke said, "and hand him the magazine-roll in the ordinary way. "I'm going to keep the hellfire Master of Derehurst sweating and guessing for a while about what went wrong."

As Prosper's business manager, I thought this a good moment to prepare the ground for a renewed offer of a settlement. With the ranch in the Rockies in mind, I said, "What went wrong for the Master of Derehurst was that he thought his telegram to Bob Kemp would be ignored. Instead, it put Prosper on his trail. You owe your life to that, sir."

"Timmy," Prosper said, with great abruptness, "if the duke wants everything to carry on as usual, we'd better be on our way to the farm."

Almost as though on cue, Thurston appeared in the great main doorway, carrying our guns and cartridge-cases.

"Shall I put these in your car for you, sir?" he asked.

"Thank you, Thurston," I said.

WE GOT INTO the car and started down the long drive across the park, in the shadow-flicker of the oak trees. Prosper looked at me through the sunglasses he usually puts on when driving in bright weather.

"What did you say that to the duke for?" he said coldly.

"You never learn, do you?" I said. "It's obvious that there's another offer of a settlement in the offing. Just let me handle it."

"Let it alone," he said. "I've already had a settlement. I owe him for five ducal years usurped from him in ignorance. Now I feel the accounts are evened up."

" 'He who will not when he may,' " I said bitterly, " 'when he will, he shall have nay.' It's madness to—"

"Listen!" he said abruptly.

He had just pulled up for the blind turn out of the main entrance gates. Now, he switched off the engine. Listening, I heard in the distance the turf-dulled thudding of a horse at the gallop.

"This'll be him," I said. "He's on Dirkshammer Down. He's coming hell-for-leather down the slope there the other side of the copse. He'll come out on the lane by the moat, and canter round to come in by the gates here. We'll get a look at him."

The thudding of the hooves grew more distinct.

"He was nervous about how far that gas might spread round the Castle," I said. "He's been sweating it out, up on the downs. Now, he can't wait a minute longer to get to the Castle and find out what's happened."

"He's coming too fast down that slope," Prosper said, listening.

"Don't forget he's a fine rider," I said.

"He'll need to be," Prosper said grimly, "if he's to pull that horse up when he hits the lane alongside the moat."

Suddenly the galloping hooves sounded for an instant a different note on the comparatively hard surface of the chalk lane. I heard a shout, a dull and heavy thud. It was followed by absolute silence.

Prosper stabbed a finger on the starter. He swung the car to the left out of the gates, drove fast for about fifty yards along the road, turned left again into the lane that skirted the wide, grass-grown depression that once had been the moat round the Castle. Between the moat on the left and the steep down-slope of the grass hill on the right, the lane was empty.

"He couldn't pull his horse up," Prosper said, "so he tried to jump the moat. They'll have crashed into it."

He stopped the car and we ran to the edge of the wide, shallow depression. In the bottom of it, a horse lay on its right side, its head in a clump of tall foxgloves.

"Where's the man?" I said.

"He made it," Prosper said dryly. "He's the other side."

I looked across at the hazel plantation on the park side of the moat, Fairdirk's Belt. I could hear the snapping of twigs underfoot and the swishing of nut-laden boughs, as a man in there somewhere thrust his impatient way through the plantation.

Rage choked me. "He can't wait, can he? Just can't wait two minutes! He wants to know what's happened at the Castle."

But Prosper was climbing down the steep grass slope into the base of the chalk-outcropped depression. The horse was blowing hard through flared nostrils into the stems of the foxgloves. Its snaffle-bit was thick with foam, its chestnut sides lathered and heaving.

Prosper stooped over the horse, talking quietly to it, his hands exploring its flanks. The horse raised its head, arching its neck to look up at him. Its forelegs struggled for a moment, but they were broken. The horse's head fell back and blood spouted from the flared nostrils and foamed pink over the foxglove stems, and the tall flower-clusters leaned their speckled bells over the dying animal and swayed in the downland sunshine.

Prosper laid a hand for a moment on the horse's neck, then turned and climbed back up the slope.

"Done for?" I said.

He didn't answer, but went to the car, took out one of the cartridge-bags, sorted through the cartridges. Apparently he found a couple that contained something heavier than partridge shot, for he broke his gun, dropped a cartridge into each barrel, closed the gun with a solid *thock*.

He thumbed off the safety-catch, and his sunglasses looked blind as he walked past me and down the slope to the horse, which started to raise its head again. But Prosper fired two shots, and the foxgloves were still.

We got back into the car and drove on to the farm, but fired no more shots that day. We weren't in a mood to kill—partridges.

IN SPAIN, we saw finally the face of the Master.

Shortly after we left England, on the day after the shoot, still not having met the Master of Derehurst I wrote a private and confidential letter to the Duke of Devizes. I told him that Prosper had been, in a sense, committed to Miss Rita Marmol to collect on her behalf the debt criminally incurred by the Devizes heir, and that the ex-duke's failure to fulfil the pledge had placed him in a humiliating position *vis-a-vis* the lady. I said that I felt the duke might like to know.

I had back an immediate reply from him asking me to deal with the matter and enclosing his check

for seven thousand pounds—rather more than $20,000—payable to myself. Confident of the sanctity of Miss Marmol's handshake, I endorsed the check and airmailed it to her without comment. It was returned to me promptly, also without comment, except that attached to it was a bill for a one-month stay by the Master of Derehurst at the Avernus Inn. The bill, a pretty stiff one, was marked "*Paid.*"

Some weeks later, more or less by chance, we came upon an arrowed sign by an Andalusian roadside: *Cortijo Derehurst—Peligro de Toros.* We couldn't resist turning off for a look at this great stock farm, and I felt more confident of our welcome than I had on the day we had visited the Derehurst Ranch in the Canadian Rockies.

Sure enough, the duke's manager, Don Alfredo Roca, received us hospitably. At a table under a eucalyptus tree in the patio of the rambling old white-walled farmhouse with its flower-trailing balconies, we drank some of the best sherry I ever had tasted.

I was enjoying myself—until Don Alfredo remarked that it was a terrible thing, almost unbelievable, about the Devizes heir. "You haven't heard?" he said, looking at our blank faces. "The English newspapers have been full of it. I had them all sent out to me."

"We've been travelling," Prosper said. "We've seen no English papers."

"This was two weeks ago," said Don Alfredo. "The Master of Derehurst was murdered."

Sunset airs rustled the dry leaves of the eucalyptus. There was a sound of distant bellowing.

"It was an explosive tube," Don Alfredo said, looking from one to the other of us. "It was sent to him through the mails in an American magazine. It's believed to have been done by a gambling syndicate he is said to have swindled. Swindled! The Devizes heir! Incredible, *verdad?* Yet—" he shrugged—"I recall an instruction I had from the duke about advancing money."

"Has there been any arrest?" I cut in.

"No, Mr. Shee," said Don Alfredo. "Inquiries led to the United States—to Nevada. Apparently nothing provable has come to light. Nothing is likely to, of course. In America, as in Europe, if a powerful gambling syndicate decides on drastic, undercover action, it is done with efficiency. But I kept the newspapers—I'll fetch them for you. But the truth is—ah, that's buried somewhere out there in the Nevada desert. Excuse me."

He went into the house. I looked at Prosper. He was wearing his sunglasses. I thought of Rita Marmol's handshake, and I said, not truly believing it, "You think that Rita Marmol might, after all—"

"Nonsense, Timmy," Prosper said.

"Somebody did it," I said. "The

duke? The Master tried to kill him once, so the duke may have thought he'd try it again. And the other nephew—the one at university—is now the Devizes heir. The duke wanted that."

"The Master's been caught in his own carefully prepared mesh," Prosper said. "This is the act of a guilty man. Whatever else he may be, Wyndham Dirk, eighth duke, is not a man of guile."

I stared at him. A feeling of slow cold began to creep over me. "Prosper," I said, "about two weeks ago I spent a few days at Cannes on my own."

"That's your story," he said. "Was she very charming, Timmy?"

But he wasn't smiling. He was looking through his sunglasses at his sherry glass, tilting it gently between his fingers. And I said, with this cold feeling creeping over me, "If you'd wanted to pay one of your brief flying visits to England and you had decided to—"

Don Alfredo came out on to the patio, saying, "Here are the newspapers." He put them on the table. "While you look at them, I'll go and give orders about dinner—and the preparation of rooms for you."

He left us. I could not take my eyes off Prosper, who continued to study his glass.

"No," he said slowly, at last. "No, it wasn't me, Timmy. I think it was the man who was so prompt

on cue with our guns on the morning of the shoot at Derehurst. A man who's been there longer than I ever was or than the present duke will ever be. A man who was born in the castle and grew up there to serve four dukes and one —" he smiled wryly—"accidental duke. A man who has access to Civil Defence stores, which include demolition charges and de-

tonators, because he's Warden of the keep. A man, in fact, Timmy, who holds—as his father and grandfather held before him—all the keys of the castle."

"Thurston," I said.

"Yes," said Prosper. "I think he killed the Master because he had shown that that was just what he wasn't—and, by Thurston's particular code, never could be."

I drew the papers toward me across the table, looked at the photograph on the uppermost page. It was a clever and handsome face that stared back at me with challenging vitality from the obituary column.

"Anyway," I said, "he's now—a *past*master."

My witticism brought no reply. I glanced up. Prosper had walked over to the parapet of the patio. He was gazing out over the wide range where the fighting black bulls roamed dusty-hided in the parched grass red-stitched with poppies, and a distant herdsman with a picador's lance moved slowly on his plodding horse, silhouetted against the lemon pallor of the evening sky.

The ex-duke, tall and blond, his hands linked lightly behind him, stood looking at it all through his sunglasses. The range had been his once, could be his again for the asking. I wondered what his thoughts were.

"He who will not when he may, when he will, he shall have nay."

I pushed the newspapers aside. They fell with a thud to the flagstones. I reached for the sherry.

Next Issue's Complete MIKE SHAYNE Novelet

CRUISE FOR MURDER

By BRETT HALLIDAY

The slaying had so many baffling angles that Shayne almost found himself wishing he'd gone on a vacation cruise the week before.

FULL CIRCLE

Joe Horn did his own killing . . . but there was always a risk when a cop was watching the show.

by DENNIS LYNDS

JOE HORN faced his murderer across the crowded Automat. The man was young, no more than a boy, but after thirty years Joe Horn could smell them, sense them. Another of the arrogant young punks they hired when they wanted a man killed.

Joe Horn was not afraid of his murderer. They were not going to scare him to death the way he had scared Don Carlo with his weak heart to death in the old days. Joe Horn could take care of himself. And they were not going to catch him off-guard like a careless old man. He had his plan. He had been waiting for his killer to appear, and he was ready.

Joe Horn had known what to expect since the day three months ago when Manny Huerta had slapped him on the back and told him he had earned a rest.

"You're The Boss," Manny had said. "Go to Florida if you want. You got plenty of friends down there. We'll handle the hard work, me and Scarpi. Go sit on a beach and do the brain work, Poppa Joe."

"You're a good boy, Manny," Joe Horn had said.

But he knew he was taking a dangerous risk. They were ambitious, the younger men, and Manny Huerta and Eddie Scarpi would not do the work of Joe Horn without the power of Joe Horn. Not for long. Even if he gave them the power, it would make no difference. They would not feel safe and in control while Joe Horn was still alive and had friends who might return to him.

"Go ahead, Poppa Joe," Eddie Scarpi had urged. "We're your boys. You taught us, eh?"

He had taught them, and now they would get him. Sooner or later Huerta and Scarpi would fight each other, but first they had to get him. He should have known better. It had been a mistake to mention that he wanted to retire, that he trusted them to run the organization. The whispers had started that Joe Horn was out. His friends were in their pay now, his army had vanished, and he was alone now.

Now he had to get Huerta and Scarpi. But first he had to stop them from getting him. He had to show everyone that he was still Gaetano Miura, alias Joe the Bull, alias Joe Horn, *The Boss*. He had to show that he was too smart, too tough, for them. It was the only way he could stay alive and on top. It was like a full circle. He was back at the beginning, alone in an Automat facing his killer.

Joe Horn was a rich man. Joe Horn ate in the best restaurants in New York, went to the best places. They rolled out the red carpet for him in most of the cities of the world. But money would not help him now. It was them or him, and only brains and strength counted.

So now he sat again at a bare table in a crowded Automat just as he had done long ago when he was no older than the boy trying to look innocent—the arogant but clumsy young punk across the room they had sent to kill him.

They would not get him, so now he again ate in Automats because automats are always crowded, are big, open rooms, and have large plate-glass windows where a cop could pass and look in at any time. He drank now in big, cheap, half-empty bars where people came in and out at any hour. He had moved from his big house in the deserted suburbs to a cheap room in a small hotel that had no fire escapes.

He walked only on well-lighted Avenues where there were policemen. He rode only in taxicabs, never the first cab, or the second, that came along. He carried the pistol he had not carried for years. Wherever he went he looked for the police, the way he had spotted Lieutenant Morley here in the Automat when he came in.

Morley was at a table behind the hired young punk with the obvious and stupid bulge under his skinny arm. Too much iron for such a

skinny kid, Joe Horn had seen at once. The young killer was too big for his own good. He just had to carry a large weapon when a smaller one would have been the smart play. You did not need a cannon to kill one old man, and the bulge gave the play away. That, and the way the kid worked so hard not to look at him. Horn had a keen eye for such things.

Lieutenant Morley had spotted the killer almost as soon as Joe Horn had. Morley was an ald hand, too. The copper had been after Horn for years. Joe Horn had bought and sold the cops, the bulls, for thirty years, and he knew them all. Morley was a good cop, he knew his job. Horn liked to see Morley close to him with his eyes on the boy. He had walked straight up to Morley the moment he had come into the Automat tonight.

"Hello, Morley," Joe Horn had said.

"Lieutenant to you, Horn."

"You always eat in Automats, Lieutenant?" he said.

"I like Automats," Morley said.

"If you'd listened to me you'd be eatin' in the best places, Morley," Joe Horn said.

"Like you're doing?" Morley said.

"With me the Automat's temporary," he said. "Besides, right now I like it here."

"I hear you're old, Horn," Morley said. "Maybe you're thinking you'll get back on top the same way you climbed over Carlo in the old days?"

"I ain't never left the top," Joe Horn said.

"That's not the way I hear it," Morley said. "Why don't you just go on down to Florida?"

"Don't believe all you hear," Joe Horn said.

"You got some plans I should know about?"

"Maybe," Joe Horn said.

"I'll be watching," Lieutenant Morley said.

That was fine with Joe Horn. He liked to see Morley and the cops now. They would help him to stay alive. He was going to stay alive, and then he would go after Huerta and Scarpi. He was going to beat them because they had all forgotten one thing—Joe Horn did his own dirty work. They had forgotten Don Carlo.

He had killed Don Carlo himself. He could have hired a young punk to do the job, but that would have meant depending on someone else, and that had been one of Carlo's mistakes. Joe Horn had been big even then. He could have hired anyone, but he did his own killing. It was safer that way, more certain.

Joe Horn remembered how he had stalked old Carlo, slowly and carefully with everything worked out to get Carlo before Carlo's men could get him. He had not hired a punk to sit in a crowded Automat with a bulge under his arm and a police Lieutenant watching the whole show.

Carlo had made it easy. Carlo had holed-up in his big house with his most trusted personal men around him. His guards had even slept in the same room with him. That had been Carlo's second mistake, one Joe Horn wouldn't make.

Because he had done the job himself, Joe Horn remembered every detail. Old Carlo holed-up like a sitting duck. Alone with his men in a big house in a deserted area. There had been no trouble finding Carlo. No trouble knowing where the killing would have to be done.

Carlo had depended on his men, and that had made it so easy. It had only been necessary to buy two of them. The guards outside had been easily disposed of. Only Max From Chicago and Tony Daruso had to be bought. They were the men in the inner rooms with Carlo.

Joe Horn still laughed sometimes when he remembered the look on Don Carlo's terrified face when he had walked into that room. The old man had been playing cards with Daruso. Max From Chicago had opened the door, and Joe Horn had just walked in with his pistol pointed.

The scene was etched forever in Joe Horn's brain. Don Carlo leaping up so fast the table and cards went flying across the room. The old man shouting.

"Max! Tony! Kill him!"

The old man white as plaster but still not aware of what happened. Carlo not reaching for his gun, because Carlo had never carried a gun. That was Carlo's boast—that his power was so great he did not even need a gun, because he had his boys to do his work. That had been Don Carlo's weakness—the certainty of his power.

"Max! Tony! Kill the bum!"

Joe Horn had merely waved his pistol once at Tony Daruso and Max From Chicago.

"Out," Joe Horn had said softly.

Tony Daruso walked out of the room without a word. Max From Chicago grinned at the old man.

"I pay you! You my boys! Max! I pay double, triple!"

Alone in the room with Don Carlo, Joe Horn grinned at the stupefied old man. His pistol was

steady. He stepped toward Don Carlo.

"You got real power, Carlo," Joe Horn said. "You just ain't tough enough. Call your boys again, Don Carlo!"

Don Carlo had stared, clutched his chest, and fallen. Joe Horn bent over. Carlo was dead. Carlo had died of fear, of a heart attack. And that was the importance of doing a job for himself. He had stood up and shot Don Carlo four times in the heart. No one ever knew that Carlo had been dead before the first bullet found its mark.

Tough and ruthless, that's what you had to be. When he walked from that room, Tony Daruso and Max From Chicago were so afraid of him that they were his men from then on. That had been his first really big step up, and he had never forgotten it.

But it looked like Huerta and Scarpi had forgotten. They had sent this young punk to scare him. They would not get him by buying his men, and they would not get him through carelessness, and they would not get him through fear. If anyone was going to be afraid it would be Huerta and Scarpi before he was finished. Two bums not ruthless enough to do their own work.

And they would not get him with a young punk too dumb to hide his weapon well enough in a crowded Automat. A killer so stupid he sat and watched his vicitm while a police Lieutenant watched him. They had made their first mistake by sending a punk killer Joe Horn could spot a mile away, and now it was time for him to act.

His first step was to show Huerta and Scarpi that they had a lot to learn about being tough and hard. He would show them that Joe Horn was a dangerous man to play games with. The first step was to kill their hired killer.

Joe Horn had his plan. He was going to hunt the hunter, kill the killer. Cool, neat, and efficient.

He stood up and walked quickly toward the door of the Automat. He moved fast and sudden, and watched the young killer closely. Startled, the killer jumped up and started after him. It was a reflex action, and Joe Horn smiled to himself. The kid was almost an amateur.

Abruptly, Joe Horn stopped at the change counter. The killer had no choice but to continue walking out the door if he did not want to tip his hand completely. But the hand had been tipped.

At the change counter Joe Horn smiled. If he had had any doubts about the identity and purpose of the young killer, he had no doubts now. The startled pursuit of himself had told him all he needed to know. He smiled even wider as he saw Lieutenant Morley saunter out of the Automat after the young punk.

There would, of course, be an-

other man outside, maybe even two men. They would be hidden somewhere along the crowded street. All of them would be waiting out there for him now. There would be someone watching the back way out of the Automat, too. He had been in the Automat long enough to be sure of that. Now he had to move fast and separate them; that was the trick.

He walked out of the Automat and turned to the right toward the West Side. His hotel was on the West Side. At the first corner he glanced quickly behind to be sure the young killer was following. He saw the punk hurrying through the crowd on the sidewalk. A long, dark car was cruising slowly up the street behind him.

Satisfied, Joe Horn quickened his pace down the Avenue. By the time he reached the corner of the next cross street, the young killer was almost running to catch up, and the long car was just making the turn.

Joe Horn knew the city as if he had built it. The Woolworth on the corner had exits on the Avenue and on two cross streets. That was why he had picked this corner, and this particular Woolworth. He went into the Woolworth. He ducked close behind the glass doors and watched the long, dark car pass toward the next cross street. A man jumped out of the car and stood where he could watch the doors of the store from the Avenue.

Joe Horn walked back out the entrance he had come in through. Across the street he saw the faint shadow of the young killer moving quickly back into a doorway as he had expected. He turned West again and walked fast across the Avenue and down the dark side street. The young man who was to be his murderer was behind him.

Now Joe Horn began the long, steady, tortuous chase to draw the young killer on. Only now, although the killer behind him did not know it yet, Joe Horn was the hunter and not the hunted. He remained just far enough ahead of the young man, and yet just close enough so that they could not be separated.

He walked along well-lighted Avenues, and crowded side streets, so that the young killer could not risk making his move. He played his quarry like an expert fisherman playing an eager but stupid fish. And all the time he knew that the killer thought that Joe Horn was the pursued, not the pursuer.

Joe Horn began to enjoy the chase. It had been a long time since he had hunted a man, and even longer since he had allowed a man to think he was hunting Joe Horn. He was enjoying his game with the young punk, but his mind was already on the next step.

Once he had disposed of this killer, and perhaps one or two more, it would be time to go after Scarpi and Huerta. Once he had shown them all that Joe Horn was as tough

as ever, they would come back to him, and it would be Huerta and Scarpi who would have to run. Joe Horn felt his nostrils flare in anticipation.

Perhaps he had been losing his grip. Perhaps he had been getting old and tired. He would not have minded retiring. But they would not let him retire, and now the old juices were pulsing through him again. It was like Don Carlo all over again, and he felt as good as ever, and they were the ones who had made the mistake. He would clean them out, get a whole new gang around him.

But new men or old, Joe Horn did his real work alone.

Then Joe Horn reached the street he wanted. It was a dark, gloomy street on the far West Side only a few blocks from his hotel. It was a street Joe Horn knew well.

Half way down its shadowed length there was a grill-work door few people knew was there. It was old, and rusted, and was not used anymore. Most of the time it was locked tight. Tonight it was not locked. Joe Horn had unlocked it that afternoon.

The door, or gate, was flush with the sidewalk. It was all but totally hidden by a thick, growing ivy vine. Behind the door-gate there was a narrow alley that led nowhere any more. In Joe Horn's youth the alley had led into a garden, but there was a tall building now where the garden had been, and so the alley and gate were never used.

The ivy had been allowed to grow thick over the gate. Until a man was in front of it, he would not see it unless he knew it was there. On a dark night it looked like nothing more than a part of the building wall covered with ivy. The instant he turned the corner into this street, Joe Horn broke into a run. He reached the gate, pushed it open, squeezed through the heavy ivy vine, closed the gate behind him, and crouched in the shadows of the hidden alley. Through the gate and the ivy he had a clear view of the sidewalk in front.

A long minute passed before he heard the footsteps of his killer. The man, the boy, was walking fast, but not running. The killer had lost him, but was sure he would find Joe Horn at the next corner. He had counted on that. With his hotel so close, he had been sure that the punk killer would assume that he was going back to his room. Another mistake.

He drew his pistol, released the safety, and waited. The hurrying footsteps came closer. The footsteps became faster.

Then the killer was directly in front of the gate.

Joe Horn straightened up behind the heavy cluster of vines.

"Hold it, punk!"

The young killer froze for an instant, then tensed to run.

"Don't even twitch!" Joe Horn warned.

The young killer was no more than five feet away from the gate. Joe Horn could see his frightened eyes searching frantically for the source of the menacing voice. Then the eyes stared at the ivy and the hidden gate. The punk stepped one step backwards. His hand moved, twitched.

Joe Horn shot him twice through the heart.

The shots echoed through the dark and empty street. In the dark nothing seemed to move or breathe. Joe Horn opened the gate and stepped out. He glanced quickly up and down the street, just in case he had failed to shake off the other pursuers.

Joe Horn froze.

A police patrol car had just turned the corner into the dark street. It's red top-light flashed before Horn could turn to run.

"All right, Horn! Drop it!" a familiar voice ordered.

Twenty feet away Lieutenant Morley stepped out of the shadows. The patrol car cruised slowly down the street, its headlights full on Joe Horn. In the distance there was the insistent wail of sirens as other patrol cars converged on the street. Joe Horn dropped his gun.

"Hello, Morley," Joe Horn said, fighting to keep his voice steady. "The punk was out to kill me. Huerta and Scarpi hired him. I spotted him, and got him first."

"Yeh," Lieutenant Morley said. "So I see."

"A man got a right to protect

himself," Joe Horn said. "I got a permit for the gun. I carry a lot of money, I'm bonded."

"Yeh," Lieutenant Morley said.

Morley picked up Joe Horn's pistol. The Lieutenant bent down over the body of the dead youth. The policemen from the patrol car stood close with their guns drawn. The wailing sirens were all around the dark street now as other cars drew close.

Lieutenant Morley stood up. "I've waited a long time, Horn," he said.

"For what, copper?"

"To get you cold."

Joe Horn smiled. "You still got a long wait. He was after me. The best you could get is Manslaughter Third, and I got good lawyers. Self-defense, Morley."

"Self-defense?" Morley said. "That dead guy isn't even carrying a gun, Horn. He's unarmed, and you bushwhacked him."

Joe Horn stared down at the dead youth. In death he looked even younger than Horn had thought him. Perhaps nineteen.

"Don't be dumb," Joe Horn snarled. "I saw the bulge, I watched him tailing me. I know the signs!"

Lieutenant Morley scratched his head. "Funny about that, Horn," he said. "He was carrying this big book in his inside coat pocket. It's a guidebook to New York. I guess he just got off the ship."

Now the whirling red lights of the patrol cars were everywhere, forcing Horn to blink furiously.

"Damn you, he was following me!" he cried in desperate protest. "You saw him shadowing me. You were watching. Are you going to claim you weren't following me too?"

"You?" Lieutenant Morley said softly. "No, Horn, I wasn't following you, I was following that kid. I never even saw you after you left the Automat until you came out of that alley. The kid never had a chance."

"Him?" Joe Horn said. "You followed him?"

"Yeh," Morley said. "He was my assignment. Manny Huerta asked for protection. Manny said you were out to get him and his whole family. I drew the kid to watch."

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Joe Horn blinked. "Huerta tipped you I was out to get. . . You watched the kid? You watched that kid?"

Lieutenant Morley sneered. "Don't try to tell me you don't know the kid was Manny's cousin! He just got over from the old country. It's no use, Horn. I've got you cold!"

Joe Horn looked down at the dead boy. Manny Huerta's cousin. A decoy. A trap. A frame. An unarmed boy sent to just watch Joe Horn so that he would think the boy was the killer sent to get him. A book inside his coat. A boy sent to be killed. They had not forgotten that Joe Horn did his own killing, that Joe Horn was tough, and smart, and ruthless.

"You're through, Horn," Lieutenant Morley said.

And Morley knew it was a setup, but that would not help. Morley had waited too long to get Horn. Even if he escaped the chair, it made no difference. In prison he would not live ten days. A sitting duck in prison, just like old Don Carlo.

Joe Horn stared at the boy he had killed. They had remembered that Joe Horn did his own killing, that Joe Horn was proud of that fact, and would be sure to try to kill his killer. Manny Huerta had sent his own cousin to die like a slaughtered lamb.

Joe Horn's legs gave way. He sat down on the sidewalk and leaned against the ivy and the gate. An innocent boy, a cousin—dead to clear the way for Manny Huerta's rise to power. The first big step up for Manny Huerta. Maybe there was always someone tougher, harder, more ruthless. Everyone had a weakness, and someone was always harder.

"Let's go, Horn," Lieutenant Morley said.

Joe Horn closed his eyes. He leaned his head back against the gate and the ivy. He was tired, and he thought, suddenly, of the old and terrified face of Don Carlos so long ago.

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POOR MAUDE

The murder scheme was so diabolical it boomeranged . . . on the far side of eternity.

by JONATHAN CRAIG

FOR A MAN only minutes away from murder, Harry Connor felt remarkably composed. He'd had a few queasy moments on the tortuous road up the side of the mountain, but now that he and his wife had finally arrived at the cave he felt almost nothing at all.

"I still can't understand why

you'd take such a sudden interest in a stupid old cave," his wife said querulously as she extricated her considerable weight from the passenger seat of the sleek red sports car she had bought him two weeks ago and waddled around the car to join him.

"*Honestly,* Harry. We've lived within ten miles of this place for almost two years, and you never even once so much as mentioned it. And now, suddenly, nothing will do but we've got to come up here and traipse through the thing. I just don't understand you."

Harry smiled at her, an exceptionally handsome man fourteen years her junior. "You used to think my impulsiveness was one of the most charming things about me," he said.

"There's such a thing as overdoing it," she said as they started toward the group of sightseers forming around the uniformed guide at the mouth of the cave. "Lovers' Cave, for heaven's sake! Couldn't you have had an impulse to go somewhere that wouldn't take so much walking?"

"You might find it more interesting than you think," he said. "You go ahead and join the others, dear. I'll have to get our tickets."

"You'd think they'd pay people to go through such a place, not charge them," she said. "I've heard it isn't even safe."

"I guess that would all depend," he said.

"What?"

"Nothing, dear. That group's almost ready to go in. I'd better hurry."

While Harry was buying the tickets, he kept one eye on the proprietor of the souvenir stand across the way. Three days ago, when he and his mistress had made their dry run of the cave in preparation for today, the proprietor had ogled the girl for long moments, and had then turned his gaze to Harry and fixed him with a hard, unwavering stare until Harry had looked away.

He and the girl had come to the cave separately, each in his own car, had remained apart during the guided tour, and had left without so much as a word to each other. But there had been a moment when they had passed each other in front of the souvenir stand, and it was then that the small, toad-faced man squatting behind his rows of papier-mache stalagmites, paperweights and book ends had displayed his keen interest in first one and then the other of them.

Today, however, the proprietor was busy taking some kind of booklets from a box at the rear of the stand, and as far as Harry could tell he hadn't looked up once during the time Harry had been at the ticket window.

Harry walked over to the cave entrance, handed his tickets to the guide, accepted the two lighted pressure lanterns the man offered

him, and circled around to the rear of the group to join his wife.

"What's this?" she said as he gave her one of the lanterns. "Don't tell me this place doesn't even have electric lights in it."

"It'll be more fun this way," Harry said. "Sort of add to the adventure, you know."

"Sometimes you act just like a little boy," she said. "You've got another admirer, did you know that?"

"You don't say," Harry said. "Who is it this time?"

"That blonde thing over there."

"Un-huh. Well, she's got good taste, hasn't she?"

"No, not that one. The one standing over there by herself, next to that glass case, or whatever it is. She hasn't taken her eyes off you for ten full minutes."

"They all look at me that way," Harry said, smiling. "Frankly, it bores me. It ought to bore you too by now."

"I'll *just bet* it bores you," she said. "What's in that glass case, anyhow?"

"A body," Harry said. "There was this man killed a girl in the cave—about ten years ago, I think it was. Her lover. Anyway, her father—he's the one who owns the cave—mummified her body and put it in that case. An extra added attraction, you might say."

"Yes, I remember hearing about it now. Did you ever hear of anything so awful? He's crazy!"

"Who? The man that killed her, or her father?"

"Both of them."

"Well, we're going in now. Watch your step, dear."

"You don't have to remind me. She's still giving you the old eye, Harry. That blonde."

For the first time since they'd arrived, Harry felt a twinge of uneasiness. Poor Maude, he thought. How long would it take her to fall to her death? Three seconds? Five?

But it had to be. His mistress' ultimatum had made that inevitable.

Despite himself, Harry felt his eyes drawn toward her. She was just moving away from the glass case, tall and cool and lovely and serene, a strange little smile at one corner of the full red mouth and the cobalt-blue eyes as guileless as a child's.

'That blonde' was the most beautiful girl Harry Connor had

ever known. She was twenty-two, with a spectacular figure and a feeling for Harry past all understanding, almost past belief. It was an awesome thing, that feeling, and when she had first told Harry how it was with her, he had been shaken as he had never been shaken before.

Innumerable girls and women, including his wife, had been infatuated with him, and many of them had been in love with him. But he had never known such an intense determination to possess him completely.

"You've got to divorce her," she'd told Harry that night as they'd sat in his new sports car, watching the sun go down beyond Corbett Mountain. "I want you for my own, Harry. I want you, and I'm going to have you."

"She'd never stand for a divorce," Harry had said. "And there's no way I could get one. You know that as well as I do."

"It can be done, Harry. We can't go on this way."

"And besides, I'd be broke, darling," he went on, as if he hadn't heard her. "I married for money, and I've got it—as long as I stay married. Money, this car—everything I ask for I get. What would we live on?"

"I have a job, don't forget."

"I can't forget how small your salary is, either."

"There's no use arguing about it, Harry. I'm going to have you. There isn't anything on earth that can keep me from it."

"You're not being rational, darling. You—"

"I'm not even pretending to be. I'm simply telling you the way things are—the way things have got to be." She paused, and when she spoke again there was a subtle difference in her voice, a difference that filled him with a sudden, chill foreboding. "There's nothing I'll stop at to get you, Harry. I mean it. Absolutely nothing."

He turned slowly to look at her. "If you mean what I think you mean—"

"I do," she said. "If I have to, I'll kill her."

He shook his head incredulously. "You must have lost your mind," he said. "Don't you realize—"

"You're the one who doesn't realize."

"I wouldn't have a dime," he said. "As long as she's alive, the sky's the limit. But with her—"

"Say it. Say 'with her dead.' "

He shrugged. "I'd be broke. She has her money so tied up I'd never see a penny. She made me sign papers before we were married."

"None of that matters," she said. "I'll make it all up to you. You'll see, Harry."

"What I think is, I'd better take you home. This has gone just about far enough." He reached down to turn the key in the ignition, but she grasped his wrist with

a strength that surprised him.

"I'm sorry, Harry," she said. "But you have no choice. We're going to kill her, Harry. You and me."

"You need help" he said. "There's this friend of mine, a psychiatrist. He—

"I need you, Harry. I've thought of nothing else, day or night, for the last two weeks. I've got it planned, right down to the last tiny detail. If you won't help me, I'll do it myself."

She meant it, he knew. She'd do exactly as she said.

"And if you try to stop me, I'll have to hurt you," she said. "I'll have to tell everyone about you and me. I'd hate to, it would hurt me too—more than you know. But I'd do it. And I can prove it, with pictures and motel clerks and so on. You know what that would mean, don't you?"

He started to say something, and then caught himself and sat there motionless, staring straight ahead.

A full minute passed, and then another. It was getting dark.

"You're not saying anything, Harry."

"I'm thinking."

"About what I said?"

"Yes."

She moved closer to him. "Shall I tell you what I've planned?"

He nodded.

"Have you ever been to Lovers' Cave, up there on Corbett Mountain?"

The question startled him. "No," he said. "Somehow I never got around to it."

"That's where it's going to happen, Harry. In Lovers' Cave. You know how caves like that always have such fanciful names for all the rooms and formations, don't you?"

"Yes."

"Well, this one's no different. There's the Crystal Ballroom and the Stardust Curtain and King Solomon's Mine and about half a dozen more." She paused. "And then, just before you come out, there's one called the Jeweled Staircase. That's the place we'll do it, Harry. The Jeweled Staircase. It's the perfect spot for it. Just one determined shove and

it'll all be over." She took his hand in both of hers and rested her head on his shoulder. "And this is exactly how we'll go about it."

NOW, AS HARRY followed his wife through the cave, he tried to clear his mind of all emotion, of everything except the thing that had to be done.

"Harry."

Poor Maude, he thought.

"Harry!" His wife's voice was insistent.

"Yes, dear?" he said, abruptly wrenched back to the here and now. They had just left the Stardust Curtain and were walking along the path that skirted Brimstone Lake.

"Why are we lagging so far behind the others?"

"We aren't the last, dear. What's the hurry?"

"I can't hear what the guide is saying. Let's walk a little faster."

Let's see now, Harry thought as he plodded along behind her. Next there's the Enchanted Bower and the Crystal Ballroom, and then—

"Harry, *come on!*"

"Take it easy," he said. "You'll trip on those rocks." And then he himself slipped and almost fell, and when he started on again he found that he had wrenched his left ankle.

He forced himself to hobble on, grimacing against the pain, cold sweat breaking out on his forehead. Something always went wrong, even with the most meticulously planned murders, he reflected bitterly. Some small thing, something completely unexpected —but always something.

"I thought you were so anxious to see this place," his wife called back to him. "Why are you dawdling so, Harry?"

He didn't answer her. The agony in his ankle was so intense that it was making him nauseous, but he couldn't stop. Somehow he had to make it to the Jeweled Staircase. Then it would all be over.

The Jeweled Staircase. His mistress had been right: it was the perfect spot for murder. It was a large columnar bulge in the wall of the cave, covered with particles of some kind of highly reflective mineral, with a narrow pathway around it. The sightseers were forced to walk single-file here, and in a deep crevice in the rock a beautiful blonde girl stood hidden in the darkness, waiting for the moment when she would step out and push another woman to her death on the jagged rocks in the chasm forty feet below.

What his mistress had meant by it's being a perfect spot for the murder was the fact that anyone rounding the columnlike bulge could not be seen by anyone else —which meant that what *happened* to that person could not be seen, either.

An accident, people would say. The unfortunate woman lost her footing and fell. A tragedy. Perhaps a damage suit against the proprietors of the cave.

Harry managed to catch up with his wife at the Crystal Ballroom. The piercing pain in his ankle had changed to a dull ache that stabbed all the way up to his thigh. But he would be able to keep up with her now, he knew; he'd have to.

And then they were passing the weird formations known as Shadowland, and it came to him suddenly that time had run out. A few feet beyond was the Jeweled Staircase—and the girl hiding in the crevice.

"Jeweled Staircase, indeed!" his wife said as she started to edge out onto the narrow path around it. "It's more like a—"

Harry grasped her arm and brought her to a sudden halt.

"What in the world's the matter with you?" she said. "You almost scared the life out of me, Harry. Whatever made you—"

"I think I'd better go first here," he said softly, and then brushed past her before she could protest.

He had, perhaps, five seconds—no more.

Two long steps brought him abreast of the crevice, and a short, hard sweep of his hand smashed the lantern against the rock wall beside him and plunged the Stairway into total darkness. Seconds later he had stepped into the crevice, brought a hard, chopping fist against the point of his mistress' jaw, and sent her body arching outward and downward.

There had been no sound of any kind.

A moment later there was a wash of light from his wife's lantern and her heavy steps on the path to his left.

"Harry!" she gasped. "Are you all right?"

"Never better," he said, smiling. "I just lost my grip on that fool lantern, that's all."

She laughed, a little nervously. "You never could hold on to things," she said.

"I can when they're important to me," he said.

"Like me, for instance?"

"Like you, for sure," he said. The ache in his ankle was subsiding now. Everything was going to be all right.

As they left the cave and passed the glass case with the mummified body of the girl inside, Harry's wife looked at it and shuddered.

"And you say her lover killed her?" she asked. "I wonder why."

"They say she gave him an ultimatum," Harry said. "She threatened to ruin his life if he didn't marry her, and so he killed her."

"The poor thing," his wife said.

"Yes," Harry said. And poor Maude, too, he thought. It was too bad she'd made the same mistake.

(Continued from other side)

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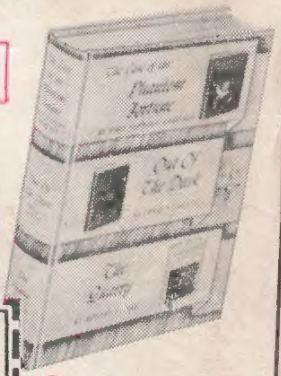

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